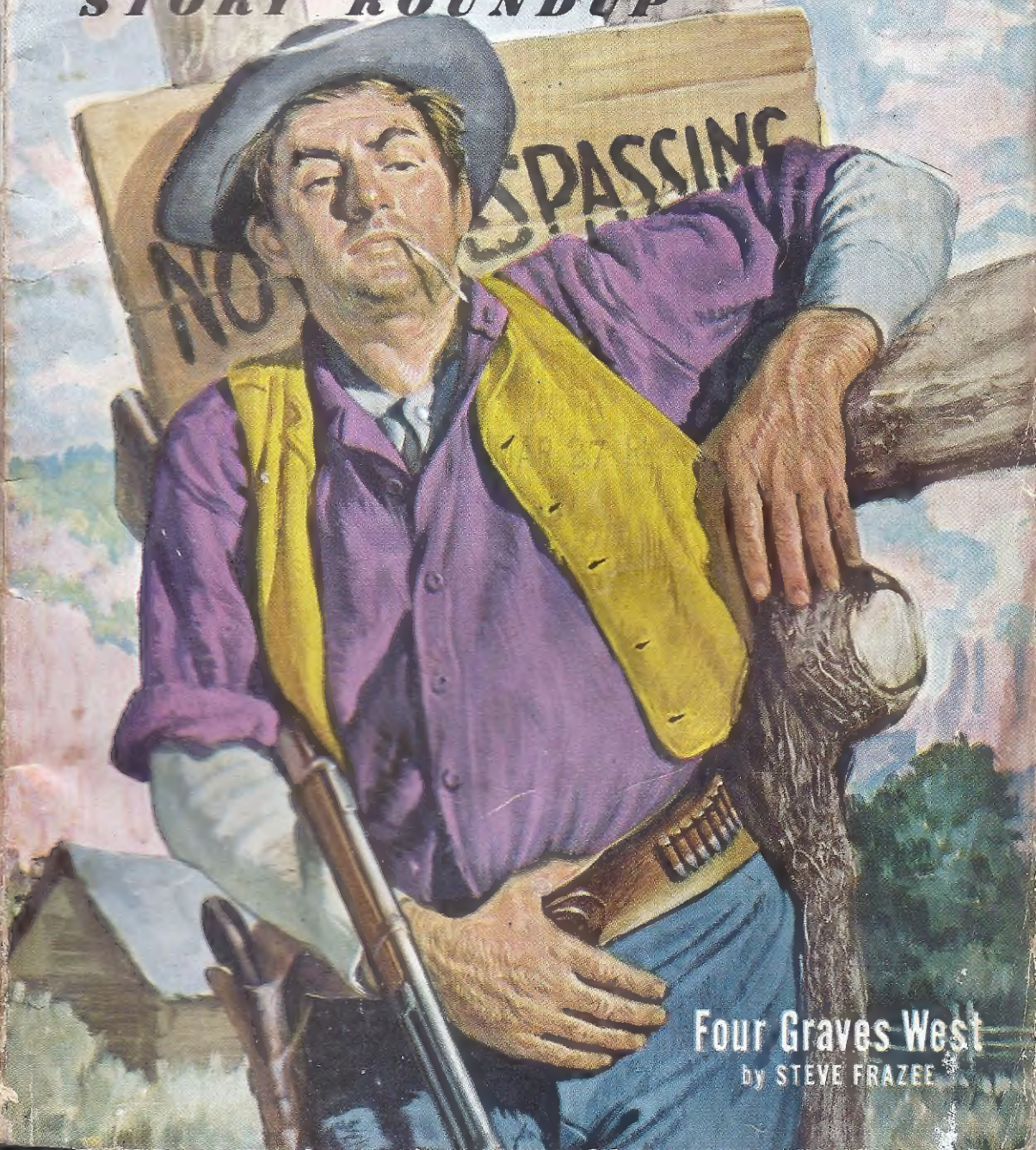


Western

STORY ROUNDUP

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Four Graves West

by STEVE FRAZEE



Western

STORY ROUNDUP

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For the faithless love of that bullet-
proud range its four sons of hell gam-
bled their six-gun heritage and won—

FOUR GRAVES WEST

by Steve Frazee

NO ONE in the Bondad country had the guts, or enough vanity, to be caught on a flashy pinto, except one man. So it had to be Asa Kirker who was riding up the sump trail toward the Wagon Wheel. A month ago none of the McCools would have cared who came toward their place, but things were different now.

Old Purs McCool twisted around from looking through the window. He glanced at his four sons. All but Ed, the oldest, were still eating. Purs pushed his chair back and rose. Ed and Lance and Steve got up too. When Purs McCool finished a meal, so had everyone else.

Art, the youngest, did not rise. He was fifteen. He went right on gulping, although a rebellious look about the eyes told that he knew he was violating one of his father's prime rules.

Ed took another glance at the pinto, stopped now while Kirker was opening the gate at Steam Springs. And then Ed looked around the kitchen. Lance and Steve were scared, but secretly delighted to see someone defy old Purs. Their father was standing stock-still, staring at Art from cold blue eyes, waiting. Ed knew he was also fighting down his anger.

Purs McCool was a big man, slightly stooped, with gray creeping upward from his temples into Indian-straight black hair. Life had slashed hard at his features, making them harsh, almost bitter. There was a hell of temper in him that Ed had seen in flame only three times, but he had seen his father fight it down a hundred times.

"Art!" the father said.

The youngest son stuffed in another

hasty bite. His words came thickly through the food. "It's just old Kirker, the old skunk. He's alone."

"*Mister Kirker, Art,*" Purs said. "Don't get flip with your talk."

It was said in the Bondad country that the McCools were all alike, that when you had seen one, you had seen all five of them; that old Purs kept them under his thumb so tightly they never had a chance to think except as he thought. Ed McCool knew how wrong all that was, even if his father was worse than a mother hen about watching young ones.

"Art," Purs said softly. When his voice went down, that was the last warning. Only twice that Ed remembered had the sons pushed on past the warning.

The Brat—after all, he *was* the youngest—was enjoying the stage; but he knew when to quit. He rose, still chewing. "Yes, sir," he said. "*Mister Kirker, Pa. Mister Skunk Kirker.*"

Purs hung fire for an instant. Steve and Lance lowered their heads to grin. It was not funny to Ed. He loved his father too much; and this sort of thing had gone on too long for it to be funny any longer. It was costing all of them too much.

McCool let it go. He glanced toward the window again. Kirker was trotting his horse into the yard. "Get around!" Purs growled.

Since Ed could remember, his father had used that expression when it was time to go to work. Some bosses said, "Let's go, boys!" On the railroad they blew a whistle. Old Purs just said, "Get around!" They all knew what to do.

The Wagon Wheel operated like an army post, without the waste of effort.

In the corner of the lodge pole pine corral Ed piddled along with his saddling. Steve and Lance likewise. They should have been half way to Bustos Ridge to work on the new drift fence, Ed thought. Kirker came into the yard and stopped. Standing on the edge of the porch, Purs did not ask him to light. Purs waited, trimming his nails with a long-bladed knife.

Asa Kirker was a handsome man, no getting around it. His features were clean and sharp, lacking the slash lines of bitterness that lay on Purs' face. Kirker's dark brown hair was curly, and it stayed nicely in place, instead of sloping all over the way Ed's did, no matter how he tried to hold it. Kirker's skin was a clear bronze. Like all the McCool's, Ed's skin had a tendency to be swarthy. Kirker's boots cost more than Ed's entire go-to-meeting outfit.

Ed admitted it—he was thinking of Kirker and himself in relation to Marcia Townsend.

"Mind if I get a drink, Purs?" Kirker asked. His voice was easy, self-assured.

McCool inclined his head toward the water box in Bustos Creek. "There it is, Kirker."

STEVE AND Lance came up beside Ed. "*Mister Kirker,*" Steve said. "*Mister Skunk Kirker.*" He laughed quietly.

"Shut up," Ed said. "We got enough trouble."

"You ain't the boss—yet," Lance whispered.

Purs knew they were there, not going

about their business. He shot them a hard glance, and they knew they would hear about it later—even if they figured on getting away before the talk with Kirker was completely over. They should be ranged on the porch beside their father. That's the way everything about the Wheel ought to be, Ed thought. But Purs wanted to do everything himself. It was not that he didn't trust his sons' competence. . . . Ed did not know exactly what it was.

Ever since the death of their mother, ten years before, Purs, who had never been soft to start, had been harsh and close-mouthed with his kids. Fair, yes; but riding herd like a man in rustler country.

"Nice day," Kirker said. He swung down and went toward the creek. Someone had told him that pistol experts wore their holsters tied low, so that was the way he wore his. He was no pistol man, Ed knew; but he grudgingly admitted that Kirker probably was tough enough. Kirker had built the Ladder into the biggest ranch in the country. He was not afraid of work, and he had done plenty of it.

But it never seemed to show on him, Ed thought. Marcia Townsend had mentioned once, during a dance over at Dot, that Kirker always looked like he had just stepped out of a bandbox. Sweating, his shirt too tight across his shoulders, his hair beginning to slip over one ear, Ed had gone out for several drinks of whiskey right after that remark.

Kirker stood with a dipper in his hand. "You've sure got good water here, Purs."

They had a lot of it, too, Ed thought; and that was worrying hell out of Asa Kirker, whose Ladder ranch was suffering worse than any in the valley during this drought.

Purs McCool just stood. The sunlight caught gray streaks in his hair that Ed had not noticed before. The Brat came sneaking from the back door. There had been no dishes rattling for some time in the kitchen. When he crossed the corral, Art was in view of Purs, and McCool turned his head for a quick look.

Art was swinging one arm, but the other, on the side away from his father, was stiff. Art was carrying a six-gun in that hand. The idiot, Ed thought. No McCool and no one who ever worked at Wheel had worn a pistol. Purs was violent about that. His own pistol was in a trunk in a harness room, and as far as Ed knew, Purs had not worn it for twenty years.

But still the four sons owned pistols. Ed had seen to that; and Purs had fretted for three weeks about the disappearance of six steers on Calumet Creek. Pistols came high. After the young McCools owned six-guns it had been necessary to keep them hidden, and to practice with them only when clear behind the rimrock that circled the Wheel.

Perhaps Purs did not see the pistol; but he saw the stiff arm, and knew Art was carrying something. He started to leave the porch, but just then Kirker came back from the water box. Art slipped through the corral bars and joined his brothers.

"What's the idea?" Ed whispered.

Art grinned. "Let that Kirker start

something, and I'll get me a Mister!"

Ed jerked the pistol away and put it in his chaps pocket, and then he took it out, kept his back to the house, and checked the loads. As usual, Art was carrying the thing cylinder-full. Ed removed one cartridge. "You never learn, do you?"

"There's six holes," Art said.

"Yeah." Ed let the hammer down on an empty well. "Some day you'll catch that hammer on your clothes or something, and you'll make a hole where it hurts."

Kirker glanced toward the corral. "Hi, boys," he said, and then he forgot them.

They were just the McCool kids, the rimrock cubs, Ed thought bitterly. Their old man did not let them carry guns; their old man gave the orders and made the decisions around here. The McCool kids did not count.

Kirker put one boot on the step and looked up at Purs. "Well, have you changed your mind?"

Purs shook his head. He snapped his knife shut with one hand and put it in his pocket.

Kirker was not used to curtness, but his voice showed no irritation when he said, "You don't care then—if the rest of us are ruined." It was not a question.

"I got all the cattle here I can handle. A thousand more in here and the Hummocks would look like sheep had been through my place."

Kirker looked around slowly. Wheel sat in the middle of a broken O of rimrock, the break opening toward the valley. Bustos Creek and Calumet Creek

ran through the ranch, and a dozen other tiny streams oozed from the dark clefts of the rimrock. In wet years much of the land on both sides of the creeks was swamp, not deep but soggy, choked with willows and brush. Farther down, near the opening in the O, where the water began to sink again into the ground, the Hummocks formed bumpy stretches of rich grassland that always held good native hay.

Kirker smiled. It was the sly, patronizing grimace that always infuriated Ed when he and Kirker happened to meet at Dot, with Marcia present.

"You were pretty foxy when you picked this place, Purs," the Ladder owner said. "I could have owned this myself—like that!" He snapped his fingers.

Yeah. Ed made a wolf-like grin there between the corral poles. Anybody could have owned the place, but back in those days the valley was a cinch for wintering choice cows; and the range beyond the rimrock was good for more stuff than anyone had money to buy. Who cared then for bushy swamp ground under the rimrock, and stretches of hay land so bumpy they had to be harvested by hand?

"I picked this place," Purs said slowly, "not because I was a smart man, looking years ahead, but be—"

"You were foxy," Kirker said. He made it sound as if McCool had rigged some sly, underhand deal.

"I never thought of dry years burning up the valley." Purs shook his gray-streaked head. "I never once thought of the rimrock range getting grazed bare. I picked—"

"You cinched the water, McCool." Kirker managed an air of sadness, as if an old friend had betrayed him. "You hogged the water and the Hummocks."

Ed saw the signs. His father's jaw muscles were working hard. If he turned white and stuttered a little, that meant his temper would explode. It seemed to be what Kirker wanted. Ed took Art's pistol from his chaps.

"See!" Art hissed. "See?"

"I never hogged water!" Purs said. His voice was loud. He was not really angry yet. "I never tried to hold a drop of it here, even when a little dam here and there would have meant a great deal to me. I can't help it if the creeks in the valley turn to scum and the grass dries out, like it has in the last two years!"

"No," Kirker said, and he drawled it long, and his tone was still digging to rouse McCool's temper. "But you don't care a hang if we're ruined. You won't let us bring our fall shippers in here for the summer."

"Your fall shippers, Kirker. No one else has asked me."

"Dab Townsend has."

"He only mentioned it. He knew, like me, it wouldn't work. Sure, for one summer, and then next year I wouldn't have grass enough here for my five hundred head."

Kirker shook his head sadly. "We've always been good neighbors, Purs. I hate to think you had this in mind when you settled here."

ED WAS gripping the pistol at his side so hard his fingers ached. Deliberate unfairness always made him

boil. His father was like that too, and now Ed was surprised that Purs had held to his temper so well, in spite of Kirker's efforts to pick a fight. It was clear enough to Ed, and maybe it was clear enough to Purs. If Kirker could start something, he was armed and McCool was not. Afterward, it would be Kirker's word against the version of the young McCools; the word of the biggest rancher in the country, a well liked man, against the word of four rimrock cubs.

Kirker knew, when he rode up, that McCool had not changed his mind and that he never would. So the Ladder owner must have come with the intention of removing the big McCool. The sons did not matter too much. They had been dependent on the old man all their lives, so they could not offer much to stop Kirker after Purs was gone. It figured that way in Ed McCool's mind as he gripped the pistol and looked through the corral bars.

"Shoot him, Ed!" Art whispered tensely.

"Shut up!" Ed said. "He's not going to get any fight out of Pa." Ed was the oldest, and he had learned that force does not settle everything.

Purs said, "You know, Kirker, that I had nothing of the sort in mind when I took up this place. I picked it because I wanted land that no one else wanted, so my kids would never be in trouble over land."

Kirker smiled, nodding slowly. "I see. The Holt County war was riding you, eh, McCool?"

Ed saw his father's face turn ashen. Purs brought his right arm back, the muscles so tight his clenched hand trem-

bled. His face was like gray, water-carved stone. "I think I heard you right, Kirker, b-but say it again." Purs' voice was soft. He had stuttered. It was evident that he intended to knock Kirker clear under the belly of the ground-hitched pinto if the man mentioned Holt County again.

Kirker took his boot from the stone step. He moved back a pace or two, standing straight. His right hand hung above his pistol. Purs came down the step, his cocked right hand still trembling. Kirker moved back, but it was not retreat.

"What'd I tell you, what'd I tell you!" Art muttered rapidly. "Shoot him, Ed!"

Slowly Kirker backed toward his horse. McCool paced after him, his body moving with terrible slowness. Kirker's back touched the saddle skirt. He went a step ahead then and stood there with his left foot extended, his right hand ready.

"I said this, McCool—"

"That's all, Kirker!" Ed yelled. The pistol was steadied across a corral pole. "Stop there, Pa!"

Purs stopped. He did not look toward the corral. Kirker did, just a quick glance that let him see he was flanked by iron. He laughed gently. "So the McCool cubs never carry guns. You've switched your ways, McCool. You saw it coming, eh? You should have. You started it."

"Get on your show horse," Ed ordered.

Kirker swung up. "Well, I guess you wanted it the rough way, McCool. That's the way you'll get it. Remem-

ber, you're the one that's starting it, and that's the way the valley will have to look at it."

Lance yelled, "You're a dirty, stinking liar—Mister Kirker!"

"Shut up," Ed said automatically.

Kirker rode out with no haste. He had left the wire gate at Steam Springs open on his way in, and now he did not close it. Purs stood in the yard until the pinto was out of sight; then slowly his arm came down, and his shoulders seemed more stooped than ever.

Ed looked at his brothers. To Steve and Lance he said, "Build your fence." To Art he said, "Get back to your pearl-diving, Brat."

"You ain't the boss—yet," Art said, but he left, and the others finished saddling quickly and rode away.

"Edward," Purs called, not even looking. "Where'd that gun come from?"

Ed went through the poles and walked toward his father. "It's mine. I've had one since I was fourteen."

Purs' voice was like grating rock. "Your brothers too?"

"They may have. It's time."

Purs started to grow pale. "You're talking to your father, Edward."

"We all should have been *standing* by our father when Kirker rode in here," Ed said. "Instead of being the McCool kids hiding in a corral, while their father tries to carry all the load."

The gray thatches of Purs' brows drew down hard. Color began to seep into the rough gravings of his face. He held out his hand.

Ed hesitated, and then he laid the .45 into his father's hand. Standing at the window with a dish rag in his hand, Art

groaned silently and shook his head at Ed in disgust. Purs examined the pistol. He gave Ed a wicked look. "That cost a lot of money, Edward." He was not quite Purs McCool, for Purs McCool seldom commented when the facts were clear.

"Four guns—and a pile of ammunition—cost the price of six prime steers," Ed said. "From what happened today, I'd say the investment was worth while."

"I'll judge that!" Purs said savagely.

Ed blinked in surprise and almost fumbled the pistol as Purs held it toward him, butt first.

"You have led the others into disobeying me, Edward. On your mother's death bed I promised her that none of you would ever wear and use guns against his fellow man."

"We haven't." It was a poor argument, and Ed knew it, so he shifted to another subject. "You've held us too close, Pa. You've tried to do everything for us, including our thinking. People think we haven't got minds of our own. They—"

"I've done what was best. I've brought you up as your mother would have."

The way he *thought* their mother would have, Ed reflected. "We're facing a fight, Pa. Why can't all of us have a hand in the planning? Why don't we—"

"I'll handle affairs at Wheel, Edward."

It always came to that. Purs ran the ranch, and he ran it well; but there never had been a time when the five McCools sat down together to discuss their problems. Four of them just sat

to listen. The trouble was, old Purs had been dead-right so much of the time, there never had been any large problems to argue and discuss. But it was different now.

"Get around," Purs said. He started toward the porch. "That is Arthur's pistol. I saw him carry it from the house. You lied to me, Edward. Now get around. I will speak about your lying later."

Never a word about the fact that Asa Kirker would have shot him dead after Purs made a wild swing here in the yard. Ed was nettled, or he would not have asked, "What was it about Holt County—"

Purs' boots scraped hard as he swung around. "Never ask that again," he said softly.

Ed set his lips. There it was. This family was just a working arrangement, because the father never took anyone into his confidence, never put any of his fears or weaknesses out where talk would have made them understandable. Ed's thoughts went back to a summer years before, when Art was seven. The four brothers came down with slow fever, days and nights of it. Alone, Purs nursed them through it. The lines in his face had become canyons, and his eyes burned red from loss of sleep.

All the way through it he had been as gentle as a mother, and everything he thought about them was on his face during those bad days. When Ed was recovering and it seemed that Art was dying, Ed had wandered weakly from the bedroom one night when he heard his father talking. Haggard, with tears running in the deep lines of his cheeks,

Purs McCool was standing before the picture of their mother, telling her that it was all in God's hands now, that he had done as she would have done; and then he had knelt on the floor and prayed for the life of Arthur, and everything that he thought of his sons was in his voice.

Stumbling from his own weakness, and with tears on his own cheeks, Ed had gone back to bed.

Chapter II

A BRUSH WITH DEATH

ED MCCOOL was thinking of that old scene now, as he stared at his father's glowering face. "Yes, sir," he said, and turned away.

"Take that sack of staples up to the drift fence, Ed," Purs ordered. "I see Lance and Steve forgot again."

It was "Ed" once more. Relations at Wheel were right back in the groove. But maybe not, Ed thought, because when he rode away he saw his father standing at the water box, staring toward the valley. Ordinarily Purs was not one to waste time like that. Maybe the old man was considering some of the things Ed had said.

Steve and Lance stopped working when they saw their brother. They waited for him to ride up the ridge. This drift fence was the first defensive move against the squeeze already started. For several weeks cattle, mostly Ladder stuff, had been coming into the Wagon Wheel the hard way, through the narrow clefts in the rimrock. "They're just naturally looking for good water and

grass. We can't keep 'em from floating that way," Asa Kirker had said.

The McCools kept pushing the stuff out of the open end of the O. They put aspen log barriers across clefts where no cow would go, unless driven; and still the cattle had kept coming in. "They'll smash through anything to get at good range," Kirker had said. "The poor critters. I feel sorry for them."

Ed had wanted to ask him about the horse tracks, but as usual Purs had done all the talking.

Ed swung down beside his brothers. He untied the sack of staples and tossed it on the ground near a post.

"Is there any use to go home tonight?" Lance asked, grinning. He was the lightest of all the McCools when it came to coloring. His hair was brown, with a little curl to it, instead of straight, lank black. When he was not working, he was drawing pictures of horses. Take him to a dance, take him anywhere, and he would likely wind up off in a corner drawing pictures of horses.

"He's cooled off," Ed said. "He even gave me back Art's gun."

Steve grunted. "Maybe he's scared of what's coming." He spoke with the contempt of a youth about twenty without sense enough to be afraid of anything. "Why don't we call Kirker's hand before things start? We know danged well he's going to try to get Wheel any way he can. He has to have the Hummocks and the water if he's going to be able to hang onto two thousand cattle through the summer."

"He can sell his cattle, like the small ranchers have been forced to," Lance said.

Lance would do all right when the chips were down, Ed thought, but still he was one who always hoped and looked for the easy way out of things.

"We know Kirker won't sell enough of his stuff to get by," Ed said. "Dab Townsend might, but—"

"You got influence with old Dabney's daughter." Steve grinned. "Work on—"

"Shut up," Ed said. "We got a big problem. Pa won't let us plan with him; he won't even tell us what he thinks about anything."

Steve slammed a pair of pliers at the fence. They caught and spun twice around the twanging wire before they fell. "Sometimes I think I'll just ride out of here. Twenty years old, and still stuck here in a hole under the rim-rock!"

You had to handle Steve carefully. He went from one mood to another so fast, even Purs sometimes was thrown off by the sudden changes. Their mother had always said that Steve was the one most like Purs when he had been young, but Ed had no way of judging that now.

"You wouldn't ride out on the old man now, would you?" Ed asked.

"You know I wouldn't!" Steve sat down beside Lance, and raked his heel across the sketch of a running horse that his younger brother was making in the dirt. "This ain't getting us anywhere. We got to go after Kirker." He glanced sharply at Ed. "What was that remark Kirker made about the Holt County War?"

"I don't know." Ed shook his head. "I know this, though—better not ask Pa about it. I did. He—"

They heard the sound of a horse splashing across Bustos Creek, and then they heard it turn from the trail and start through the aspens toward them. Steve took his pistol from his chaps pocket.

Art came out of the trees on Bad-eye, a steeldust hellion that he would not have saddled up if Purs had been home.

"Where'd Pa go?" Ed asked.

"Toward town. Gimme my gun."

"What for?"

"It's mine."

"You're careless with it," Ed said.

Art swung from the saddle. Bad-eye tried to whirl and go down the hill, Art was alert. He jerked the steeldust's head around. The gelding snorted and tried to rear. Art threw weight into the reins and fought Bad-eye all the way, leaping sidewise when shod hoofs crashed down at him. He got the animal under control, then led it to the fence and tied it.

"Gimme my gun."

Steve laughed. "Tough pearl-diver!"

"Next week is your turn, Stephen." Art held out his hand toward Ed. "You ought to be glad I brought my pistol out to the corral, or else by now Pa might be dead."

"Promise to keep the hammer on an empty hole?"

"There's six holes— All right. Gimme the gun."

The four young McCools tried to plan what to do about Kirker. It was not so easy to figure out. They lacked experience in any kind of planning. Steve considered the men Ladder employed, eight of them. Six were just ordinary hands. Largo Andrews and Rio Keene,

the ramrod, were quite a bit tougher than ordinary. Steve made it sound simple. Just eliminate Kirker, Andrews and Keene, and that took care of things.

Lance was drawing another horse. He did not look up. "We just go out and shoot the three of them, huh?"

"Sure," Art said. He had pushed the cylinder of his .45 away from the frame and was spinning it.

"Shut up!" Ed said. "You're fifteen years old, and you're trying to sound tough!"

"Shut up yourself! I was the only one that brought a gun out to the corral, wasn't I?"

Steve groaned. "We'll hear about that from now till whales start swimming up Calumet Creek."

They were not getting any place at all, Ed thought. Maybe Purs knew what he was doing when he never bothered to ask their opinions on any matter. Ed scowled at the thick stand of spruce trees clotted above the pale green of aspens at the base of the rimrock. Responsibility was lying heavy on him, and he did not have an idea of what to do.

Lance said, "Maybe old Dab Townsend—"

They all heard it, the crashing in the timber below the rimrock.

"More Ladder stuff," Steve said. "Just wandering in. I feel sorry for the poor critters." He tried to imitate Kirker's voice.

"Wandering in, yeah," Art said, "after somebody beats dust off their rumps with a rope."

"I said that first—three weeks ago, Brat." Steve scowled at the timber.

"Oh, oh!" Lance murmured. "I saw a hat, just the flash of a gray hat."

ART SNAPPED the pistol cylinder into the frame and threw the lever down. "This is the showdown!" he said.

"Shut up," Ed said. "Just set. It sounds to me like they're swinging along the hill. If they do, they'll run into the fence when they turn, and then let's see what happens."

He was right. The crashing sounds stayed on the hillside, in the timber, until the cattle were on Bustos Ridge, and then they came straight at the fence.

Four McCools rose up from behind a windfall of aspen trees when the first cattle began to bawl and spread along the wire. Largo Andrews and Rio Keene were driving them. Keene, bulky, pale blond, and burned red by sun, was just loosening his rope.

"Figuring to rope a post?" Ed asked.

Andrews stabbed at his pistol, and then he relaxed. He was a stringy, big-nosed man, with eyes set so wide apart they seemed to be pushing at the temple bones for release. He put his hands on the apple, and looked at Andrews.

"Where's your old man, boys?" Andrews asked.

"In town," Steve said. "Why?"

The Ladder foreman laughed, but his pale eyes were tight and searching. "I thought you were the second oldest, Stevie. Do you always speak out in the lead?"

"It doesn't matter," Ed said. "We're all together. What do you want with Pa?"

Andrews' horse seemed nervous, but

Ed observed that the blond man was clever with his knees. He was moving the claybank in and crowding cattle against the fence. Keene took the cue and began to crowd on his side of the animals. Some of them slipped along the fence and escaped, but others were being forced into the wire.

"Don't put 'em into that fence!" Steve said.

Andrews grinned. He tried to look apologetic and hurt. "Why, boys, we wouldn't do that. Doggone, they're sure spooky." He kned his horse in harder. "We seen this bunch drifting over the rimrock, but we couldn't catch 'em, so we figured we'd best come on down and drive 'em through your place to the valley."

"That stinks!" Art cried. Like the other McCools, he carried his pistol in his belt against the small of his back.

Andrews had looked them over, Ed thought, and now he was sure of himself. No gunbelts, flat chaps pockets and the fact that Purs had never yet let his kids wear guns. The Ladder foreman was danged sure of himself. Ed was mad enough to start it, but he knew this was no place for trouble; not with unpredictable Steve and the crazy Brat along. Good Lord! They were just kids.

"Wait a minute!" Ed said. "We'll let you through."

"Why, that's right neighborly, boys," Andrews said. He grinned like a lobo wolf looking down on straying calves, and he kept pushing his horse in. A wall-eyed steer, hemmed in, growing frantic, reared up and tried to turn to bolt from the fence. Andrews waved his

rope. "Hy-yuh! Hu-yuh!" he yelled.

The steer twisted and slammed ahead into the fence. Posts cracked, wire creaked, and the whole mass of cattle started to jam the fence.

Steve reached behind him, pulled his pistol, and began to shoot into the herd. A steer went down. Another reared and bellowed in pain. Another got its front legs over the wire and tried to lunge. Steve shot it dead. The weight settled on the strands. Wire broke with a twanging protest. Art began to shoot into the herd.

Lance and Ed had no choice. They drew their pistols and put them on the two men across the wire, and they caught both the Ladder men sitting their saddles in slack surprise.

Six animals were down. Art calmly shot a wounded steer that was bellowing. The rest of the herd broke along the fence and high-tailed into the timber. Art started to finish another wounded steer, and his gun hammer clicked.

"Six holes, load five," he muttered.

Steve finished the steer. And then it was silent. Andrews and Keene got their horses under control.

Ed was in a savage mood. He was afraid too. He had not figured on this at all. Maybe it would have been better to have let them smash through the fence. The hell! It had to start some time.

"You came down over the rimrock, Andrews," he said. "Go back that way. Better put up the log block you knocked down, too. Tell Kirker his game has run out. Tell him to try something else."

The scabby patches of sunburn on Andrews' wide face were dark red from his anger.

Rio Keene tapped his fingers on his saddlehorn and looked sidewise at his boys. "The rimrock cubs got claws after all, Largo. What d'you know!"

"You crazy brats," Andrews said. "There was some Dot stuff in that bunch." He pointed at a dead steer with the DT-Inside-a-Circle brand of Dabney Townsend. He pointed to another steer that wore the Flying M brand.

The M was a two-bit spread that was almost out of business, Ed knew. Those two dead critters were probably the only two in the whole bunch that had not worn a Ladder.

"Nobody's going to like it when they hear that Purs McCool's kids went hog-wild and started blasting valuable beef for no reason," Andrews shook his head.

"You were jamming 'em into the fence on purpose!" Art yelled. He had reloaded his pistol.

Andrews made a tch-ing sound with his tongue. "We was trying to clear 'em away from the fence, wasn't we, Rio?"

Keene nodded. "That's exactly it."

Ed McCool had never learned how to combat outright lies told blandly. All he could do was point his pistol toward the rimrock and say in a choked voice, "Get out of here."

THE MCCOOLS stood by a broken fence where flies were beginning to buzz. They listened to the sounds of the Ladder men riding back toward the rimrock. Art was the last to put his gun away.

"We sure handed it to them!" he said.

Lance stared at the dead cattle. "We played hell, you mean."

That was the way Ed was seeing things. They had caught the two men utterly by surprise. It would never happen again. Ladder would spread its version of the incident all over the valley, and down there, where people were already halfway set against the McCools simply because Wheel was secure while others were suffering, folks would readily accept Ladder's version.

And then there was Purs. He was not going to like this at all. The brothers looked at Ed. "What do we do now?" Steve asked.

"You didn't ask that a minute ago," Ed said sourly. "Now you want me to straighten everything out."

"Sure." Steve grinned. "You're the oldest, ain't you, Eddie boy?" That was Marcia's name for him when she wanted to tease him.

"Get that mess of beef off the wire! Fix the lousy fence! Get around," Ed yelled.

They laughed. After a while Ed grinned wryly. They repaired the fence.

Art was still laughing about the way they had put the run on Ladder when it was time to go home. And maybe that was why Art was careless when he went up on Bad-eye. The steeldust never missed a chance. Bad-eye exploded before the youth was fully in the saddle. Art grabbed the horn and tried for the other stirrup, but he did not make the raffle. He lasted until the second jump, and then he was thrown hard on the rocky hill.

Lance rode like a madman to catch the steeldust. Steve and Ed were still pouring water on Art at the creek when Lance came back, leading Bad-eye. There was a little cut on the back of Art's head, and that was all. But he was as limp as a wet saddle blanket, and his face was gray.

"He ain't got a busted neck, has he?" Lance asked.

"No!" Ed said. He did not know. He was afraid that that was just what was the matter. Unconsciousness stripped Art of everything he had been and done that day. He was just the baby brother now. His hair was all flat from water, and it looked the way it had when their mother had bathed him as a baby in a wooden tub by the cook stove.

Ed said it out loud, "*Oh, God, he's just a little kid. Let him be all right, please!*"

"What'll we do, Eddie?" Steve asked.

Art lay there on the moss, gray and motionless, with water still running from his face.

Ed leaped into his saddle. "Hand him up easy. One of you lead my horse."

On the way in, Steve said savagely, "If he dies I'm shooting that steeldust dead!"

"You can't blame the horse," Lance said.

Purs was throwing a saddle on his big blue roan when he saw them coming. He dropped the rig in the dust and went over the corral fence like a huge cat.

"Where's he hit?"

"Back of the head. He won't come to," Ed said miserably.

Purs gestured toward the house. All

the harshness was gone from his face, and the stark cast of grief on his features made his sons look away from him. They put Art on the same bed where he had been born. He lay without moving, and his breathing was barely evident. Purs' hard, scarred hands moved gently as they felt Art's neck and back. A big thumb pushed up an eyelid. Ed went sick when he saw the cold, unseeing stare of the exposed eye.

Purs turned the injured lad on his side, and looked at the back of his head. "That ain't no bullet mark."

"No. He got thrown from Bad-eye," Ed said.

"I thought . . ." Purs put Art on his back again. He removed his boots and loosened his clothes. "All we can do is wait. He ain't got a broken neck, I'm sure." Purs eased himself down on the bed, and he glanced over his shoulder at the oval picture of his wife on the wall. His lips moved, but he made no sound.

They waited for more than an hour. Purs never moved, just sat there with his hands clasped. The bawl of a cow somewhere down by the Hummocks came to Ed as the most mournful sound he had ever heard.

Lance began to blink hard when Art's head started to roll weakly from side to side. Art's tongue moved aimlessly in his open mouth. He made little muttering sounds.

Steve ran his sleeve across his face and began to grin, and a little later Art opened his eyes, and after a while he saw them all. "That Bad-eye horse," he murmured. "Oh, man. . . ."

"Look here, Art." Purs pointed down

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at his own knee. Art raised his head. "I don't see nothing," he said, and lay back again.

Purs McCool smiled at the picture of his wife. Ed walked out of the room quickly and stood on the porch. The sun was going down above the rimrock. He had never seen a prettier sunset, and the sounds of bawling cattle near the Hummocks were the most beautiful sounds he had ever heard.

Chapter III

TROUBLE CUTS SIGN

PURS SAT with his chin in his palm and looked across the supper table at three of his sons. "An ill-considered deed," he said. "You should have let them through."

"Ed said he would," Steve explained. "They didn't wait. They wanted trouble."

"All those cattle have been driven down off the rimrock," Ed said. "The evidence is clear enough."

The father's cold blue eyes went from one face to another. Long habit made them all feel uneasy. "I know that," Purs said. "Did you four help the situation any by your act today?"

"We couldn't help ourselves," Lance said.

"Who started the shooting?" Purs asked.

The brothers looked at each other. "Me," Ed said.

At the same time Lance said, "All of us."

"I did," Steve said. "I started it."

Purs stared at them. "I have raised

a gang," he said, "and the truth is not in them."

"You've caused us to set ourselves apart from you." Ed knew it was a dangerous statement to make, and then he was surprised to see that it seemed to strike deep into his father. Purs' steady stare gave way. He took his hand from his chin and rubbed it across his heavy mane, and stared at the table.

"You made a promise about guns," Ed said. "We don't understand why—but that's all right. Suppose we had brought Art in the way he was a while ago, not from being thrown, but from being shot down when he was unarmed? Suppose Lance—"

"That's enough." Purs' face was marked by an inward struggle. Ed had always known that Art and Lance were the favorites, and he had played on that.

"Violence never settled anything," Purs said. "It only brings ruin to lives."

"Somebody ought to tell Kirker that." Steve's voice was flat. "He intended to kill you today, Pa."

"I know that! Are you trying to tell me what I learned when I was thirteen?" Purs flared, but the heat was not in his words or manner. He was unsure.

They had him hemmed in, Ed thought. They had caught him in a weak moment. In a way it was unfair to crowd him like that, but they had never had the chance before. They had to put their weight on him to make him admit there was only one way to defend Wheel. It might help, Ed thought, if they knew why he was so afraid of violence.

"I will talk to Townsend," Purs said. "He has some weight with Kirker."

"When Andrews tells his lies about what happened today, Townsend will have no use for us," Ed said.

"Maybe they learned their lesson today," Purs licked his lips, staring at the table. "They may leave us alone."

Steve's dark face turned toward Ed, and Steve shook his head gently. It left Ed uneasy, off balance, to see his father trying to twist away from facts.

"There are men in the valley who won't be fooled by Kirker's lies," Purs said. "Men like Chapo Brown . . . others. . . ."

Lance was moving his finger tip in deft drawing gestures on the oilcloth. He looked at Ed quickly.

"Chapo Brown," Steve muttered.

Purs was not even talking sense now, Ed thought. Brown, a half-breed Apache, was respected in the Bondad country only for his ability to track and read sign. He owned nothing but a cabin, did little except hunt. If deer were ranging far, he took a slow-elk. Ranchers had always growled about that, but as far as Ed knew, he himself was the only one who had ever caught Chapo Brown in the act.

That was several years ago, beyond the rimrock. Ed rode up on Brown skinning out a Wagon Wheel calf. Brown just grunted hello, and went on with his work. First, Ed was in a rage, and then he was bewildered by Brown's casualness. The man looked tougher than week-old blood. He wore a pistol and a knife, and he was good with both.

After a few minutes of watching the flashing knife, Ed had said, "Uh—nice-

looking meat." And then he beat it back to report to Purs.

Purs had listened without expression. Then he said, "Our stuff wouldn't be straying that high if you and the boys did your work right. Forget it. Chapo ain't no long-rider. He's just hungry."

And now Purs was mentioning Chapo Brown, as if his opinion counted against Ladder's and Dot's—and all the rest of the valley. Ed's eyes narrowed. He stored two thoughts away.

"There's just one thing to do—fight," Lance said.

Purs' face was heavy and old. "You too, Lance." He gave Ed a dark look. "You've poisoned them all, Edward."

Ed shook his head. "They know the truth when they see it, that's all."

"I'll judge what's the truth!" Purs got up. The others did not rise, and Purs did not seem to notice the fact. He stamped out of the house, without even saying, "Get around!"

Steve shrugged. He looked at Ed. "You and your big conferences with the old man! Where did we get? There's just one way—"

"Sure!" Art called from Purs' bedroom. "Shoot Kirker, Keene, and Andrews."

Steve grinned. "Bloodthirsty Brat. Hit him on the head again, and he'll want to clean out the whole valley."

"Shoot old Dab Townsend, too," Art called. "But save his daughter for Eddie boy."

They choused the stuff out of the brush and willows and the bog ground on the lower side of Calumet Creek. There were eighteen head, mostly Ladder and Dot; two Flying M's, and one

each from Duck Foot and Two Stars. Every brand had been worked over into Wagon Wheel, and some of the work was very crude. They held the bunch at the Hummocks and waited for Steve.

"We'll go straight to Townsend first, and show him," Purs said.

Townsend was being sucked into this thing against his will, Ed thought. And yet Townsend was sour because he was selling in a bad market, forced to by the drought, while the Wheel was sitting pretty. He knew it was no one's fault, but still he was leaning toward Kirker's lies.

When Ed went the last time to see Marcia, Townsend had met him at the gate. Kirker's pinto was in the yard.

"I ain't sure just what did happen at the fence," Townsend had said. "But maybe you'd better not come over for a while."

"What's a while?" Ed started to open the gate.

"No, don't do it. Maybe a while is for good, McCool."

"I'll ask Marcia about that!"

"She's my daughter. You better ride, McCool."

"To hell with you," Ed said. "You won't keep us apart, unless she wants it that way." He looked savagely at Kirker's pinto, and rode away.

AND NOW, waiting for Steve to return from the drift fence, Ed thought that nothing had been improved by hot words flung at old Dabney.

Slouched on his rusty bay, Lance shook his arm toward the cattle. "Would anybody believe something as crude as that?"

"I dunno," Purs said. "I dunno."

Steve came galloping down the creek. They crowded around him. Art was still pale, but he was all right now. Purs had not said a word when Art threw a rig on Bad-eye.

"They didn't cut the fence," Steve said. "They took up four posts and laid it down—and then they put it back. They were mighty careful about dragging out tracks."

Purs turned his blue roan. "Let's get 'em out of here."

It was too late. Townsend and Kirker were riding up the sump trail. They crossed Calumet and rode over to the cattle. Townsend would not look at Ed. Kirker smiled and spoke as if greeting old friends.

He said, "I was a little hasty the other day, Purs. I've told Dab that, and now I've come—"

Townsend grunted. He was looking at a changed brand, and it was his own steer. His sharp features seemed to grow sharper. He threw Kirker a quick look.

"Eighteen head, all changed to Wheel," Purs said. "We been gathering them up all morning on the creek. Somebody brought 'em over the rimrock and through our drift fence."

Even in his tension, Ed did not overlook the "our."

"Would you know anything about that, *Mister* Kirker?" Steve asked. He fingered the unbuttoned pocket of his chaps. His pistol was inside.

Kirker could look as innocent as a sheep-killing dog, Ed thought. The Ladder owner did not lose the expression as he rode around the bunched

cattle. "Even some M stuff," he said. "Now that's mighty odd."

"Damned odd, the whole business," Townsend said darkly. He looked at Purs, and then he looked at Ed. "Cut your drift fence, eh?"

"Laid it down," Steve said. "You heard. Maybe you—"

"Shut up," Ed said. "We were just going to bring the stuff over to Dot for you to see, Mr. Townsend."

"I imagine," Townsend said dryly. "We can relieve you of the job, eh, Kirker?"

Kirker nodded.

"You both showed up just right," Steve said. "How come?" He looked at Kirker.

"That happened to be my idea," Townsend said. "Asa and me have been talking over a proposition we were going to make to Purs. I suggested coming over."

That meant nothing, Ed thought. Kirker was clever enough to handle the timing.

"G-get out with your s-s-stuff!" Purs said suddenly.

He whirled the blue roan and started up the valley.

"You heard him," Steve said.

"Don't crowd, button," Kirker said wickedly. "I ain't a helpless steer caught in a fence."

Ed moved his horse between the two. He gestured down valley. The McCools were silent as the cattle were driven away.

"One more big lie against us," Lance said.

* * *

Marcia Townsend was waiting in the

dusty cottonwoods at the big bend of Valley Creek when Ed rode into the grove on sandy ground where even brush was withering. Mrs. Townsend, who ran her husband without his ever realizing it, had sent a rider to Wheel the night before to tell Ed about the meeting; and right there Ed knew at last that he had beaten Asa Kirker in one way. Dab Townsend too.

Ed swung down and faced Marcia awkwardly. She was the prettiest girl in the world, sturdy-slender, laughing brown eyes. Her features were clean brown, with none of her father's sharpness in the lines.

"It's been a long time, Eddie."

"Twelve days."

They started to sit down on the ground, but ants were swarming there. Marcia's horse stamped impatiently. The cottonwoods were pale with dust. From Valley Creek came the smell of scum and stagnant water.

This grove is the most wonderful place in the world, Ed thought. "I'm going to see Chapo Brown," he said to Marcia.

"Chapo Brown!"

"Your father knows he's the best tracker in the country, don't he?"

"Doesn't he? I suppose so, yes. What—"

"It's just an idea," Ed said. There was more that she did not need to know. "Your old—your father—wouldn't be so hard to get along with if Kirker was out of this, would he?"

She took a deep breath. "No. Asa Kirker prods him all the time. I know. Kirker tells him how wonderful it would be if they owned Wheel together. The

drought won't last forever. Kirker says Dot and Ladder could use the Hummocks for choice cattle in ordinary years, and as a place to fall back on in bad years."

"It wouldn't quite come out that way. Kirker would have to have everything."

She nodded. "You think I don't know him? He's been trying to court me for two years. In the back of his mind, my father must realize how he is being used; but he's desperate, Eddie. He's selling cattle at a loss now. He's trying to hang on. Dot can make out, if we strip things pretty close."

"But all the time, there's the Hummocks and all that clean water at Wheel. My father's only human, Eddie; and Kirker keeps jabbing at him, and rigging those lies against Wheel."

"You don't believe we rustled, do you?"

"Of course not! My mother doesn't either, and I don't believe my father really believes it either—but it's a good excuse to move against Wheel." She bit her lip. "My father, Eddie, is not as strong-minded and hard as yours."

She did not know that Purs had not been very strong-minded about anything lately. Purs had been fighting himself, and he could not seem to get organized.

"I must go," Eddie said. "I'll meet you at the Devil's Bridge on the rim-rock, three days from now—at noon." He added, "If I can."

She walked to his horse with him. "Kirker is *buying* cattle, instead of selling them," she said.

They looked bleakly at each other, because of her words, and because their

love was tangled in the net of events that were moving toward violence.

"Work on your old man," Ed said. "Put your mother on him. He's going against trouble if he rides with Kirker."

"We've tried. We're still trying." She smiled. "It will come out all right, Eddie."

Sure it would. Sure it would. He was like Lance, hoping. Her last words were bright for a while, but then he was gone from her and the words were nothing; and he knew that it was going to take plenty to make things come out all right.

CHAPO BROWN, a spring-steel blade of a little man, with eyes like a beaver's, and Apache on him everywhere, except for close-cropped gray hair, drank strong tea from a coffee pot, and heard Ed out.

"I can look at the tracks. I can say what is truth afterward."

"The sign is two days old."

Chapo spat through the open doorway of his cabin. "It is dry. I can tell."

He had not said that he would. Ed waited. Chapo put sugar on the tea leaves and ate them. It was enough to kill a man, but he had been doing it for years. He was an old man now, in years, but he looked as if he never would die.

He finished the tea leaves. "It will do it," he said. He grinned. "Uh—nice-looking meat."

"Then tell Dab Townsend the truth of those tracks, but don't tell him I sent you."

"He will know, but I will tell him."

Ed wanted him to leap up and get

going, but that was not Brown's way. And so they sat, with Chapo belching contentedly now and then.

"You used to come to Wheel pretty often," Ed said. "When I was a kid."

"I am your father's friend, but I learned at last that my face reminded him of things he did not want to remember. So I do not go to Wheel any more."

Ed put stored facts together.

"You and Purs were in the Holt County war together."

Chapo's black eyes were like chips. He gave a little nod.

"He didn't tell me all about it," Ed said. "What it was that made it so awful for him."

Chapo stared at a weedy hillside, but his eyes, glittering fiercely, were looking down the years. "It was just a fight, over grass, over water. But it was bad for Purs."

"Why?"

"He killed his brother in it. Your mother's brothers were on the other side, too, and they were killed." Chapo stood up. "That was a long time ago, Ed."

It was only yesterday to Purs, Ed knew.

This present struggle had brought it all back.

Chapo picked up a heavy Sharps rifle. Suddenly he put a hard stare on Ed. "You knew nothing about Holt County. You guessed, and you tricked me into telling you what I thought you already knew."

Ed nodded. "How is it that Kirker knows?"

"A weasel knows many things. I will

look at those tracks under the rimrock right now."

Chapter IV

BULLET SHOWDOWN

THE McCOOLS sat at their big table in the living room. It was growing dark outside. There was no fire or light in the room.

"No," Purs said. "No, I can't run away."

"You've got to," Ed said. "They're coming tomorrow morning—Ladder, Dot, the whole valley. Chapo Brown told me. They'll hang you for rustling."

"They don't want us," Steve said. "Get the old he-lion; the cubs will be helpless then." That's what Kirker has been telling them."

"How do you know that?" Purs asked.

Ed said, "We have friends in the valley."

"Not enough of them. . . ." Purs muttered.

"Go to the brush cave in the rimrock," Ed said. "They'll look around. They'll threaten. They'll leave. In a while they'll calm down when they realize how Kirker has used them."

"No. I won't do it," Purs said.

"Then you'll cause a fight," Lance said softly. "Do you think we'll stand by and watch them hang you?"

"Violence never—" Purs said.

"It has to be in some things," Ed said. He took a deep breath for what he had to say next. "The Holt County war has ridden on your shoulders—"

Purs lurched up. His chair fell over. "I told you—"

"Sit down!" Ed's tone was brutal. The brothers had planned this in advance, and now they all echoed his words, "Sit down!" It was like the tone of judgment in the dark room.

Purs McCool fumbled for his chair. He righted it with a little clatter. His body went into it heavily.

"You've carried that old fight long enough. You're not passing the results on to us," Ed said. "Your brother was killed, our mother's brothers were killed in a fight we know nothing of. It's done. Where right was—it doesn't matter now. It's done.

"Our mother forgave you before she married you, or else she wouldn't have married you. You let it ride you, in spite of what she said. When I was little she told me all about it, and she said she hoped you wouldn't hold a feeling of guilt forever." Ed cast around for his next words.

"She never told you!" Purs said. "You found out from Chapo Brown!"

"She told me," Ed said. Probably only Lance, of the other brothers, knew that he was lying. "She said, 'Your father knows that I have forgiven him for any part he had in that fight, but sometimes my forgiveness does not seem enough for him.'"

She could have said it. She might have said it. The words did not seem like a lie to Ed McCool.

"That was your fight, Purs," Ed said gently. "Tomorrow, whatever happens, it ours."

The father did not hear. "She said that." She told that to a little boy. . . ."

He murmured, "But she promised never—"

Laddie told me about it long ago."

Coming from Lance, the words took the father's last doubts away. He was merely musing when he said, "She promised we would never speak of it to anyone."

"Time changes the meaning of a promise," Ed said. "Our mother knew that. You should learn it, Purs."

The last light died above the sharp line of encircling rimrock. A coyote threw its mournful plaint into the dark. The McCools sat in a silent room.

After a while, Ed said, "Saddle the blue roan for Pa, Steve. Put some grub in a sack, Art."

Purs roused up as if coming back from far away.

"I'll keep Art with me at the cave," he said.

Ed reached across the table and gripped the youngest brother's arm when a quick intake of breath foretold a protest.

The oldest brother said, "That's best, Pa."

When the sounds of two horses died away on the Bustos Creek trail, Lance turned to his brothers in the dark. He asked, "Who is actually coming—or do you know, Ed?"

"Some of Ladder, maybe some of Dot—if Chapo Brown's word didn't go down with Townsend—and probably a few coyotes that would be afraid to speak up to Art alone."

THE OPEN end of the O was an ideal place for ambush. Ledges of broken rock looked down on a narrow passage. Since one mind could think of that, another surely could also; and so Ed forgot the place. He and Steve and

Lance left their horses in the brush, and picked the roughest spot they could find close to the sump trail.

There was still dead grass from last year lying under new growth. It was open ground, if a man had to rise and run, but the sump trail, fifty yards from willows on the other side, was even more open. And that's where Kirker would be. No man could ride a horse full tilt across this section of the Hummocks.

The morning sun came down heavy on the three brothers lying behind the bumps. Wetness began to seep up against their legs. Something scared three cows from the willows across the sump trail, and for a while Ed feared that Kirker was trying to bring his force in under cover. But there were no more noises. The cows began to drift toward the Hummocks.

They looked like a hundred when they rode up the trail; there were thirteen of them, Kirker and Townsend in the lead. Keene and Largo Andrews, two other Ladder riders; the Dot foreman; Provo from the Flying M, and five who were coyotes with little personal interests involved.

Ed let them come almost abreast.

"If they was figuring anything, it would have been back there," Andrews said.

"Just the same, we'll go in careful on the house," Kirker said.

Ed called out, "Never mind! You're close enough now!"

"Where the hell—" Andrews drew his gun and whirled his horse the wrong way, toward the willows.

"The Hummocks, you fool!" Kirker cried.

Townsend waved his arms at those behind him. The horses jostled to a stop. "Now let's not be hasty, boys!" Townsend cried nervously. "We got to consider both sides."

"You got religion a little late, didn't you?" Steve yelled.

Kirker said something in a low voice to Keene and Andrews. They began to turn their horses.

"Now, Ed, we don't want no shooting trouble!" Kirker called. He spoke to the two other Ladder riders behind Keene and Andrews.

"Then beat it fast!" Steve yelled at him.

Ladder was the hard core. The others were just the husk now, but still they were here. Two of the coyotes began to ease back down the trail. Kirker, Keene and Andrews fired at the same time. Their bullets chunked into the Hummocks around the McCools. Kirker's men moved as they fired. Keene and Andrews lunged their horses down the trail. Kirker and the other two roweled ahead.

"Flank 'em! Crawl in!" Kirker yelled.

Those left in the main body were slow to act. They tried to spread out. Their horses bumped each other. Men fired wildly toward the Hummocks. The two coyotes who had started to retreat kept right on going, and two more joined them.

Townsend was yelling, "Stop it! Stop it!"

Flat between grassy mounds, the McCools concentrated on Kirker and the two going ahead. Steve got a horse. It went down hard and the rider pin-

wheeled after he struck ground. He rose. His leg gave way and he fell, and then he crawled behind his dead horse.

Kirker and the second man got past. They veered into the creek and flung themselves from their mounts. The second man staggered and grabbed at his arm when Lance and Ed fired together, but a moment later the fellow had flung himself flat and was using the cover of bumpy ground, too.

Andrews and Keene had gone down the trail, crossed the creek, and now they too were working in through the mounds. They covered each other expertly with their firing. Kirker and the other man were getting closer.

Lance was white and scared, but he kept firing carefully, whenever there was a movement at which to shoot.

"Hey!" Steve muttered. "This ain't so good."

Another man had left the group still in the trail. He went down and joined the four who had pulled out previously. They waited a few hundred yards away. They were coyotes all right.

TOWNSEND, PROVO and the Dot foreman were left in the open. "Hold it! Hold it!" Townsend cried.

Then suddenly he slumped from his plunging horse and struck the ground. Provo and the Dot foreman leaped down and began to carry him toward the willows. The shot had not come from the McCools, and that was all Ed knew about it.

"It's getting tight!" Steve said. The coyote riders waiting down the trail saw it too. They moved up a little.

Lead churned the mounds above the

McCools. Kirker had picked his men well. They knew how to fire and move in, covering each other. Lance turned on his side to reload. White as he was, he spoke calmly. "We can rush Kirker and the other, and get clear."

One or more of them would go down, Ed knew. He remembered Art's face when Art was lying unconscious. "No. Let them come in to us. Make it cost them!"

The heavy boom of a rifle from the willows startled Ed. He saw a gout of mud and grass erupt from a mound somewhere close to Kirker. There was one rifle in the country with a bellow like that—Chapo Brown's old Sharps. It spoke again. Largo Andrews let out a howl. Then, from somewhere a little farther to the left in the willows, Purs McCool's voice roared, "Give it to 'em!"

A pistol barked four times from close to his voice. The waiting coyotes fled. Provo yelled, "We're not in this!" He and the Dot ramrod were kneeling beside Dab Townsend.

The man with Kirker rose and ran. "Let him go!" Ed yelled, but Steve had already knocked the legs from under him. Chapo's heavy rifle bellowed again. Rio Keene leaped up, his hands held high. Steve started to rise. "Shut up!—I mean, stay down!" Ed ordered.

Asa Kirker's contorted face suddenly was only a few yards away. He had worked in closer than they realized, leaped up, and made his play. Ed missed him with a snap shot from a cramped position. Lance made a little groaning sound as his pistol hammer came down on an expended case. Steve turned too late from looking down the

Hummocks, where Keene was helping Andrews to his feet.

Kirker went sidewise all at once. He fell, still trying to get on top of the three McCools with his pistol fully loaded. An instant later they heard the sullen, churning boom of Chapo's rifle. That was the last shot of the fight, and the one that counted most.

The Ladder boss was dead. Andrews was shot through both thighs. He had kept on firing to the last in spite of his wounds. The other two Ladder men had broken legs.

Ed ran over to Townsend. "In the shoulder," the Dot foreman beside him said. "Kirker done it. I saw the shot."

Kirker had played it to win everything, and he darned near had.

"I guess I saw the light a little late," Townsend said.

It was not late at all, Ed thought, but let Dab Townsend suffer.

Chapo Brown came from the willows and started toward Keene and Andrews.

"You were there all the time!" Ed accused.

"Sure." Chapo's face was Indian-blank. "You didn't need no help—for most of it."

Purs and Art came out of the willows farther down.

"We were a little late," Purs said,

"but we *did* get here!" He was the old, rough McCool again—but with something new in his voice.

"He made me tell the truth about what you planned, Ed," Art said. "He took my pistol away."

"You can have it." Purs spun the weapon and gave it back to his youngest son. "It shoots high anyway."

Art put the gun in his pocket. He looked at Townsend's gray face, at Largo Andrews being half dragged toward them by Keene, with Chapo walking behind. Art looked at the man who lay with a broken leg beside his dead horse, and he listened to the other Ladder rider groaning near the creek. He glanced at the crumpled form of Kirker out in the Hummocks.

It would be a long time before Art McCool talked so loosely about shooting people, Ed thought.

In a conversational tone Purs said to Chapo, "You ain't been around enough lately, Apache."

"Maybe." Chapo glanced at Ed, and almost smiled.

Ed started across the creek to get his horse out of the brush.

"Give her my love, Eddie boy!" Steve yelled. "And don't make a big hero out of yourself when you tell it."

"Shut up," Ed said.

Hell and Texas

Such was the reputation of the Lone Star State, immediately following the Civil War, that it was not mentioned in the more manly conversations over the rest of the West, for years. When you said someone had gone to Texas, you didn't necessarily mean he had gone to Texas.

You meant he had gone bad, hit the outlaw trail.

It was considered a nicer way of saying Hell.

SUNUP AT KAYCEE



"Be slow to talk and quick to draw in Kaycee, *amigo*—or you'll be dead a long time after!"

by T. C. McClary

MIDWAY OF the third morning after that scrambled, day long rustler fight, Campbell Phyfe came upon the carcass of Ryerson's horse precisely as the .45 slug had dropped it in the trail. The horse had dropped instantly and there were other horse tracks ahead, but there was not a single boot track to show what had happened to Ryerson.

If the man were dead, this made nine of his original ten men, and the remaining one, Randall Black, Phyfe suspected of being the spy who had tipped off the Ambers bunch that the sixty-man posse was coming. The posse had been organized under a federal marshal

and his order—*account for every Ambers man, living or dead, by five sunups from now, or don't ever call yourselves men again*—was about the last completely clear thought in Phyfe's head.

He had no means of knowing how others had come out, but his own bunch had paid man for man for the toll they took of the Ambers crowd. It was a grim price to pay for the lives of a pack of murdering thieves, but his men had faced it without hesitation. Now he had to finish the job as determinedly.

He was reasonably sure that one rider ahead was Randall Black, but who the other man might be was puzzling. The

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two riders were traveling an hour or better apart. It seemed logical that the first man would be an Ambers man making an escape, but he would have heard the shots along the trail, and studying the situation from a switch-back, would have waited up for whoever killed Ryerson and others. But a marshal's man would have no reason to be first on this trail, unless he had gotten lost or trapped in the tumbled confusion of the Big Horns and was heading for this trail's junction with the old Astorian.

Phyfe had been three full days without hot food or fire, one full day with no food whatever, and half a day on rationed water. His trail had been constantly up grade into these desolate reaches of the Big Horns, except when he had crisscrossed impossible stretches of boulder fields and bogs in getting from trail to trail.

The fight had started when Ambers ambushed the posse, but it had busted wide and handsome all over the landscape, and now it reminded him of the old Jackson County war. He had been in a tough pickle then, and just by God's luck had run in with Jack Douglas, a man to stand at your back if there ever was one.

Remembering Jack, he had an utterly spent man's moment of weakness and wished the old rawhide was there now. He had a dim idea of having actually seen Jack somewhere in the dust of battle. But fatigue had robbed his veins of blood and was like a long sucking wind at the marrow of his bones. He was above timberline in the scrub country and height was getting him. Con-

scious of these things, he knew he had not seen Jack. It was a confusion of memory and fatigue.

Kneeling beside Ryerson's dead horse and failing again to cut sign on a boot track, he closed his bleak blue eyes and squeezed them tight. Lifting his square, blunt face, he ran a calloused hand around it, slowly and hard. When he opened his eyes again, the endless weariness was still in him like a stain, but blood was running in his neck and his thoughts were clearer. A horseman could not vanish into thin air, and certainly could not scale that sheer rock wall. The only other direction was down.

Making a quarter pivot upon one knee, he studied the bare field of dead brown slab and shale that pitched toward the black chasm for a full thousand feet. There was no way of cutting for sign in this chill leaden light. A body striking the precarious pitch of that grade rolled too fast to leave much trail. In any case, these shale fields were always on the move.

Three times he closed his eyes to rest them, and then went back over every foot of field. Finally, he found the thing he sought—not a man's outline, but a scant blob of white that might be a man's face. It was the only white thing in that field, and it lay against a square slab five hundred feet down grade.

Dead, he thought, but he hated to trust sight. Yet it was too treacherous footing to risk the climb. Finally, he took a different risk and, cupping his hands, called down.

The sound of his voice was like a call of death through the utter silence of

that world of space. He listened intently, but no slightest murmur answered him except a slide of rocks.

"Dead," he repeated at length, and pulled to his feet. This left only Randall Black unaccounted for.

Phyfe poked back his hat and stood with his boots spaced and his head lowered, staring at the ground. His gun's weight was enormous in his condition, and he felt the impulse to heave it away. He had only one bullet left in any case, but there were still those two men ahead and he might make that bullet count.

He moved to his canteen and sucked out a careful sip, and then turned his attention to the bare, desolate country ahead that reared up straight into the leaden sky. He was struck by the grim humor of the fact that, except for random pockets of water, a man could thirst to death up here from where most of the water came. When those clouds opened, the peaks turned to actual sheets of water. An hour later, the dead, steep rock had shed every drop down wild gorges that a man could not reach.

"God's country!" he muttered grimly, and warning his horse to brace itself, swung back into his saddle.

AT THE turn he got down again to cut for sign and from it could just about picture how Ryerson had been shot. It was definitely the second rider who had killed him. The other set of tracks was a little older—by perhaps an hour.

He blew against wide thin lips, scowling as he tried to fathom this. It did

not make sense. The man in the middle had to be with one side or the other. There was only one way to find out, and he took it, feeling the strain and pull upon his muscles as he swung up again to his saddle.

He was high now; even the low brush was petering out. The altitude was telling on his heart and breath, the grueling slowness of his pony's pace, its increasing need to rest. There was nothing here but cold and wind and rock. Straight up to God on one side; on the other, straight down to the devil, he thought as he considered that, any instant now, his exhausted horse might drop.

The second of the shot rattled his dozing brain awake. It was followed instantly by that terrible noise—a horse's scream. Somewhere above and beyond him there was the heavy thump of a body and the gathering roar of a slide of rock.

He drew rein, thinking sharply, That is one or the other and the horse went over the trail. That leaves one man—but on which side?

He sat there perhaps an hour, not sorry for the needed rest. On this stretch of trail it was impossible to get afoot. There was not room. His mind went over the details of the fight and chase again, item by item, yet completely impersonally and detachedly in the way of one floating far out at sea. Across the continuity of the thought images floated other random memories—the changing quality of the light; the gradual increase of the penetrating cold; the shrill and wicked song of the night winds beginning in the deepening shad-

ows of the gorges so far down below.

After a time he shivered and came out of his semiconscious daze. Any man with sense would have turned back six hours ago. But he was Phyfe, not any man with sense, and marshal had said, "*Get every last Ambers man.*"

He had to spur his horse roughly to begin the slow climb again. There was a small, flat-floored gully that gave onto the trail ahead. Here and there it held a sprinkling of brush and water. The remaining man would camp there, he judged, and he would come on the other just about dusk.

The rock shoulder scraped him rounding the last corner, so narrow was the trail. Then it broadened abruptly and, over a steep grade, flattened. In the middle of this short space, a man's figure sprawled.

The light was now a thick and dirty gray, and from his saddle, Phyfe could not tell who the man was. He raised his head and took a deep breath for smell of smoke and then listened intently, but heard no sound ahead. It was a chance, but risk had dulled its edge after the last three days, and shortly he climbed down stiffly from the saddle, steadying himself.

He had to bend over the man and turn him, and then peer closely at the worn and bearded face. This was Randall Black all right, shot squarely through the head. He had one arm thrown out and the fingers of his gun hand were bent grotesquely, as if he had been just about to shoot. But there was no gun in his hand and it had not been ripped out.

"Must have pitched it as he died,"

Phyfe thought, and then heard the chilling command as he stood up.

"Don't move!"

The grim voice had a familiar ring. He sought back into memory even as he froze and asked, "Who goes?"

There was a long pause and the crunch of footsteps, then silence from the man he could not see. Abruptly there came the hard breathed query. "Why, gawda'mighty, is that you, Campbell Phyfe?"

"Jack Douglas?" Phyfe grunted as his memory caught. "Why you old coot! So you were in this!"

"In it all right," Douglas growled. "But not out. My horse went down. By the looks of it, yores is broke and we are stranded to hell and gone up here atop the world."

The footsteps came nearer as Phyfe turned. Douglas said through flattened lips, "That mangy dog tried to shoot me in the back, but it is bad luck his horse reared over."

He prodded Black's body once with his toe and then looked at Phyfe, grinning and holstering his gun. "It was a whangaroo of a fight, wasn't it, old son?"

They stood for a space peering at each other through the deepening dusk, conveying to each other the unspoken thoughts and feelings of two old friends who have ridden a rough trail together.

"Damn, I wish I'd known you were in the riot!" Douglas grunted finally. "Better one than that last massacre when we hired out for the county war in Arizona."

"A long time back." Phyfe grinned, and felt the awakening warmth of

friendship discovered in a place of lonely death. "We were in a bad jam then!"

"But we got out," Douglas said. "Mebbe between us, one will win through now." He made a sudden irritated popping noise of his lips and dropped his head. Phyfe could picture him scowling at the dark. "Life is too damn grim in this country," Douglas said.

He made a gesture and then grunted, "Haul in yore hoss before it pitches over," and turning, hobbled off for the gully that gave onto the trail.

"The pore critter's spent," Phyfe admitted as they took stock. "Its hoofs are split clean through. Yores dropped under you?"

"Not quite. Got me here, took a drink and dropped dead. Nothing in my gear worth anything except a rope, canteen, knife and saddlebags we can cut for boot soles. There is some brush in here, but I got no matches."

Phyfe chuckled. He had matches and coffee, but no food. He did have a good blanket.

"Hell, we're rich!" Douglas yipped. "I plumb forgot I got corn, and hoss steaks won't turn my stomach! Old son, we are going to have us a feast, and I can use it!"

The brush was scarce and they had to eat their steaks and sourdoughs half raw. But there was warmth in the food, and life, and there was plenty of water, and two men beneath a good blanket could survive the knifing cold. They found some overlooked brush to warm coffee for breakfast, and to men half dead with fatigue, even raw meat tastes good.

During the night, Phyfe's pony had died. In the freezing dawn of the high altitude they began unshucking every ounce of useless gear. "I sure hate to do this," Douglas said and he patted his gun and cached it. He looked at Phyfe with a twinkle in his slatey eyes. "You'da been reasonable safe last evenin' if we weren't friends."

"Out of powder?"

"One left."

Phyfe chuckled. "Same here."

Chapter II

STORM

THERE WERE a few other items to cache—some money, their coats and blankets, their saddle gear.

"Sure hate to leave all that meat to the buzzards," Phyfe grunted, but an extra pound could kill them on this trail. What they needed most, anyway, was fire and water.

"Reckon we're like to be all that's left, the way hell was a-poppin'," Douglas noted.

"The marshal took Ambers back to Powder River," Phyfe told him.

"And they slept in a warm bed!" Douglas growled. Then he grinned and stuck out his hand. "Mebbe one of us will get through for the hanging! All set?"

Phyfe nodded as they tied the rope between them. "Our chance is straight across to Kaycee. Goats wouldn't try it."

"We couldn't hit the old Astorian?"

"Too far," Phyfe told him. He jerked his head at the thick moil of leaden

clouds. "When that water dumps, it'll stop us anywhere. Unless we're down to brushwood, we'll freeze."

"Yore country," Douglas allowed and tested his knot. "Let's see, tomorrow sunup was the deadline the marshal set."

"That's right." Phyfe nodded. "Reckon we don't have to worry which side Black was on."

"He didn't smell right on my side," Douglas grunted. "Let's hobble, son."

Phyfe led out, wondering silently how far they would get before disaster overtook them. There was no wind, thank God! They were right in the midst of clouds. At times he could not see the trail at his feet and had to feel along the cold wet wall. For an hour, he knew Douglas was still with him only by the tautness of the rope.

In an hour he paused and gave warning back to Douglas to take in slack as he came up. A trip on that trail could be fatal. Their lungs were heaving and their hearts hammering in their ears. Their knees shook like castanets.

"If we pass the breakthrough here, we're sunk," Phyfe gasped. "How far have we come, you reckon?"

"Mebbe a mile," Douglas considered.

Phyfe gave a cracked laugh. "Yo're bad off as me! A mile in this swirl in high heels would be good going for fresh men. We're half froze."

They sprawled down against the dripping wall to rest and the stretch of Phyfe's legs sent a stone crashing off the trail ledge. "Nice friendly country hereabouts," Douglas grunted. "Wish I hadn't run out of tobaccy."

After a long space they got to their

feet and struck out again. Phyfe found himself unconsciously hugging the wall. It had rubbed a hole at his shoulder and his right elbow was raw. He noticed then for the first time that he was staggering, and that his sense of balance and direction were awry. At briefer and briefer intervals, now, they had to stop for breath. The whole world that closed them in was nothing but a wet, gray light, yet his eyes were stinging as from desert glare.

Pauses to blow were growing closer. Fifty steps, thirty steps, ten steps—Phyfe counted them. The last stop was nine steps. No power in him could drag his quivering legs forward that extra one.

He sent back a cracked, raw call to take in, and Douglas was a long time coming that sixty feet. When he got there, Phyfe was lying back against the wall gasping and sobbing. Douglas was nearly as badly off.

"We've missed the breakthrough," Phyfe rasped brokenly. "We must have."

"Cross draught?" Douglas gasped.

"How would we know?" Phyfe demanded and needed to add no explanation. They were both so dazed they might be walking in their sleep. They could pass a dozen openings and not notice one.

"We had a spell like this after the county war," Douglas recalled. "Only then it was sand. I wanted to turn back, I recollect."

"We counted 'em," Phyfe remembered. "How many steps did we go forward?"

"Forty-nine."

Phyfe answered with an expressive suck of breath. The memory put new heart in him. Even against the dazed condition of his mind he wondered at the small weaknesses that will throw strong men, and at the even smaller things that will put heart back into men half dead.

"Let's go," he grated, and pulled heavily to his feet. It took an eternity. Twenty steps—twenty-five—God in Heaven, how could an easy thing like one more step rip the very guts and heart right out of a man? Thirty-nine steps. . . .

"Just ten more," he told himself crazily. "Just nine—no, I'll give it six extra steps to make sure. . . ." He was still gritting that berserkly to himself when the wall he was crawling against vanished and he fell violently to the right.

"*Don't let it be just a crack!*" he prayed. But he was strengthless and addled and could not move and could not bring his mind to put values on small signs and make sure.

It was minutes after Douglas piled on top of him that the latter was able to sit up and cackle, "It's it, Cam Phyfe! The mists are streaming like a river!"

Phyfe sat up beside him and both just sat there laughing like idiots. Phyfe stopped abruptly, his mind steadied by a memory out of nowhere. Weeks before, when his hip pocket had ripped, he had jammed a piece of tobacco down the narrow tools pocket in his jeans.

He fought frantically for it. He fought that pocket as if it were a cougar. He was so spent he had to fight.

He had to fight just to breathe. He found the plug and held it up in a trembling hand.

"Look," he rasped. "Four full chews!"

They had found gold together once when they were kids, but the excitement of it had been no greater than this. They sat there staring at the dark blob in the thick pearl light, feeling it and caressing it as if it were a great jewel. Then they had a long, gasped argument about who would take the first chew.

The tobacco gave them strength and cleared their minds; not even food could give the immediate stimulation of a good chew. For the first time since breaking camp, they could really use their heads.

"One lone man in history," Phyfe said finally, "got through from here to Kaycee and he was too crazy to remember how. Two men made it another time and only remembered a gorge to cross." He looked around at his friend grimly. "If rain hits us first or that gorge is this side timberline, we will decorate the trail."

"Too good for that," Douglas growled. His vitality was stronger by three days' warm food. "I've bought me an expensive spot on boothill."

Their worn faces twisted with what they thought were grins, and they got back to their feet. The draw sucked the clouds down over them like a river, but the heat of the sun on this side had begun to warm the rocks and they made out the downtrail a little ahead of them. Suddenly they were beneath the clouds and stopped dead. What they were climbing down was not an ordinary

gulch or draw, but a damned chimney.

"Awful high ladder," Douglas grunted. "I dunno but I'd rather not seen it!"

They grinned and then blew and studied the trail beneath. In places, the pitch was seventy-five grade. A ray of sunlight slanted obliquely through the clouds upon a low hill several miles away. Phyfe noted the angle and muttered, "Eleven o'clock. It has taken us about five hours to make two miles."

"That is a right ugly looking hill," Douglas considered. "I recollect one like that left me skinned an' blooded as a rabbit, once down Texas way."

"We have to crawl over this one, too," Phyfe told him emotionlessly. "Do we jump down this chimney or take it easy?"

"Take yore pick. There's a nice landing ledge about two thousand feet down there. Looks soft, too."

They gave each other a look of hard humor and Phyfe led out again. Without a man whose skill you trusted, you'd be lost getting down at all. The entire chimney had to be dropped by stages, the leader skidding and tumbling, counting on the anchor man to catch him and looking for fresh anchor spots as he passed.

At the bottom, Phyfe felt battered senselessly, and Douglas' back felt broken.

They threw themselves down on a rock and lay there gasping. They were still in rock country. They were dripping sweat, but in moments they were chill and raw and chattering and needed a fire badly after their licking.

"There is brush on the side of that

slant gorge but it is all damned high up," Douglas was saying when Phyfe's wild yell battered his ears.

"Good God, get out of here!"

The storm had broken in the higher peaks above and a solid sheet of silver was hurtling down the chimney right over them. There is an instinctive desperation in men that surpasses weakness, and it took possession of them now as no courage could. Phyfe yelled, "That ledge!" and pointed, and they raced through boulders for the wall down which the chimney cut.

The ledge was twenty feet above them and Phyfe knew that, weakened as he was, he could not have made the throw. Douglas made it on his third try, snagging the rope just as the sound of the cascade became a deafening roar, and the first wild surge of water smashed and rioted across the rock floor.

Neither man knew how, or where, he got the strength to scramble up the rope.

Chapter III

SUNUP AT KAYCEE

THEY HUDDLED on the ledge, their whole bodies battered by the single element of noise, watching the big shelf beneath them turn into a leaping frothing hell of waters gone absolutely mad. Boulders higher than a man were whipped around like pebbles. The suck of the draw became a separate screech threading through the roar, and then, with waves jolting and grabbing at them, the roar of the falls began to drop. Shortly there was only

the smashing of waters at their feet and the dropping whine of the run-off gorge, and in minutes there was no sign of the berserk lake except a network of trickles.

The two men looked at each other and they were gray. "I will take Brahmas and bullets to that any day!" Douglas allowed through tight lips.

"If you can pray," Phyfe said, "pray now. We have got to work our way down that gorge. That must be the gorge the old-timers talked about."

They let themselves down and cleared the rope. Giving the chimney a look of mixed fear and fury and respect, they began moving down the slippery wet bed of the gorge. The avalanche of water had left the place icy cold.

Suddenly Douglas pulled short on the rope and called sickly, "Go on without me, Phyfe."

Phyfe turned and found Douglas shaking violently and clinging to a rock. The cold and wetness had gotten at the bigger man the hardest, and in rough travel there is no answer to the shakes. Douglas had misstepped and sprawled out a dozen times, and his whole body was a mass of bleeding cuts and bad bruises.

Phyfe looked around, but there was no brush on the walls that could be reached and the cold was getting at him too. Then a brief shaft of golden light slanted through the clouds and brought detail out of the flat and somber landscape below. This gorge or chute cut down through a shelf, the whole of which pitched steeply to a basin floor. Unknowingly, they had passed timberline, and sparse, stunted

trees showed over the edge of a narrow ravine that gave into the gorge.

"Firewood!" Phyfe chattered gratingly, and that single word brought the surge of desperate determination Douglas needed. In minutes they had struggled up the ravine and found dry wood, and from Phyfe's waterproof matchbox, had a fire going.

They made a batter of cornmeal paste the best they could and cooked it in the ashes and topped this off with half a handful of dry coffee on which they chewed. Cutting fresh soles for their boots, Douglas grunted, "Damned if I couldn't eat these boots too."

"We'll have breakfast," Phyfe told him with sudden surety, "in Kaycee." He had spied a goat trail running parallel with the gorge, and that meant comparatively easy going.

Warmed and dried and fed in a way, the depression drained off them, leaving the grim and violent determination to survive that belongs to their breed. They were still high, but not at the dizzying altitudes. They had covered the worst of the way if rain still held off. Phyfe had just grunted that thought when they came up against a sheer black gorge that chopped clean across the shelf from wall to wall and blocked their way.

They stopped dead and glared at it angrily. This, then, was the gorge the old-timers had meant, and not the chute down which they had come. Along its edge they found the trace of a large old stump, but the solitary big tree which had probably lain across the gorge had long since gone. No other tree in sight was big enough, even if they had the

means of felling it across the chasm.

"I make that about five rods wide," Douglas grated. "But even if I could make the throw and lock the rope, I ain't got the strength to pull myself over."

Phyfe answered him with the half note of a harsh laugh. They were both pretty near the end of their strength. Another night in the open, hurt, worn out and unprotected as they were, would finish them. At best, they would greet morning without the strength to walk. If the rains came out of the peaks they would not greet morning at all. And the gray light was beginning to soften with tints of mulberry and lavender hues. Far away, the angle of a slicing golden ray was getting low.

"We've got no choice," Phyfe said. "We have got to get across right now."

Douglas' lips twitched. He did not laugh or speak.

"There is a crack in that far wall of the gorge," Phyfe pointed out. "If a man could be swung and get a foothold there, he could make the top—if he had the strength to climb."

Douglas gave him a level look. It was not the first time men had done this trick, and the breaks went with the first man over. A frayed rope, a lot of things, could happen after that. Partly for that reason, and partly because the lightest man could anchor the rope if he could not stand the pull, the smaller man was always first. So Douglas said emotionlessly, "Get set to drop over, then."

"I haven't got the strength to make the climb," Phyfe told him. "You have. You had hot food for three days that I didn't, and by the pound, you were

always a stronger man than I, Jack."

"This is no time for manners," Douglas growled and began a careful examination of the rope. "If I get over, you're good as there. But you might get over where I can't and the man left here is stranded."

"I'm thinking of that, and it means more than me. I've got a feeling I want to be in Kaycee by dawn, Jack."

Douglas shot him a glance. "Got a hunch an Ambers man might be left alive and be there?"

"That's it." Phyfe nodded.

"Ain't changed a damned bit since we was kids," Douglas said with the first ghost of a smile he'd dragged out in hours. "Recollect you had to clear up some unfinished business after everybody else was shot up and the county war was over the same way." He tossed over the end of the rope. "Well, this is it," he said as he knotted his sling.

Phyfe took measurement on the length of the arc by measuring with his knife held at arm's length. He said, "This spot should do for you to go over and the ledging is rolled. But when I go over I am going to be coming straight at that wall, mister, so pull in all the slack you can."

"Protect yore gun arm, son," Douglas growled, and with Phyfe braced by a tree and playing out rope, the big man went over the edge into the chasm.

At the end of the rope, Phyfe yelled and heard the peculiarly hollow answer of Douglas' voice from below. He could feel the strangling pull of the rope through his whole body as the heavier man began to swing. Douglas missed three times. Each of those long arcs

pulled so that Phyfe turned dead white. Yet he had to keep shifting the length of the rope an inch or so better so that the stone burn would not be over the stone again for the next swing.

Suddenly, the terrible pull relaxed and after a space the call sang out, "Pay in! This crack is slippery." Then Douglas was standing right across from him, breathing hard and wiping bloody hands, but grinning grimly.

"Come on over, son, we got a date at Kaycee."

PHYFE WIGWAGGED, moved forward of the stone burns and set the sling under his armpits. For a brief space he stood staring into the thick black shadows of the gorge. He could take an angle, but not as good a one as Douglas, due to the fact he had to jump. There was no way for him to be let down.

He lifted his head and looked at Douglas and nodded once. "Here comes," he called, and jumped. The other wall came at him with a roar, and smashed him like an avalanche. He felt himself falling and had the one dim thought through crashing lights that the rope had snapped. Then howling darkness engulfed him.

He could see a star at an immeasurable distance, but he fuzzily concluded he was in hell because fire was blazing and crackling right beside him. Then he felt the wet neckerchief rubbed across his forehead and the back of his neck. Douglas' face formed out of the splitting, light-shot darkness.

Phyfe gasped, "That damned wall came up and hit me!" and in his con-

dition experienced honest anger. "The rain cleared!"

"Not even a drop," Douglas said. He shot Phyfe a curiously amused look. "That means we can travel drybed, son, instead of scraping our way over that sandstone mountain."

"A lot easier, but a lot longer," Phyfe said.

"You'll never tackle that mountain after the way you hit that wall and be in Kaycee by sunup," Douglas said.

"I don't know what the hell I got my mind set on that for," Phyfe grumbled.

"You were born that way," Douglas said.

They took the last of a pocketful of coffee and munched on it and, starting out, had their last chew of tobacco.

Hitting a well-worn cow trail a thousand feet down, they pushed on and came on the drybed at midnight.

They used their last match for a fire, rested and started out with a decent moon for light. The bed of the river was packed sand and, after their rough trail, was like a dance floor. For all that, the early morning wind had begun to drift when they stumbled into Kaycee and found the last light at Horan's bar.

Horan stared at them from a poker table and the cigar fell out of his face.

"Never mind," Phyfe rasped in a voice he could not recognize himself. "Set out the best. Put on four steaks. And give us two matched guns."

"You, Phyfe!" Horan wheezed.

He set out the bottle, and put steaks to sizzling and came back with the guns and a box of ammunition. "These do? They got all the Ambers outfit, though.

You won't need a gun right off, boys."

The two men felt the heft of the guns and exchanged a look. They were good guns.

The steaks came on and they devoured them with quarts of coffee, and then sprawled back for a cigar. "Damned near sunup," Douglas grinned. "We ought to be in bed."

"I don't think they're right about the Ambers bunch," Phyfe answered. He drew deep, savored his cigar and studied the ash. "I might go down if I'm right, Jack, but I will black out damned glad of coming off that mountain in good company."

"It had been a long time and it was a good meeting," Douglas grunted. "And a good bottle of liquor, son!"

They tossed it off as the first touch of gold began to thread the gray outside. Phyfe reached for the box of bullets.

He said, "After coming across that gorge, I'm superstitious as hell. We met with only one bullet, and now I've got some business to attend to, but I'll part the same way."

He spun the chamber, dropped the shell in position, and shut his gun. Douglas said with a man's satisfaction at an old friend, "Haven't changed one damn bit!"

They nodded at Horan and hobbled like a couple of cripples for the door. The sun was just coming over the horizon.

"I'm turning left as far as Dwyer's," Phyfe said. "If I am wrong about finding an Ambers man in town, I will see you later in the day."

"I'm turning upstreet about the same

distance," Douglas said. "If yo're right, make that bullet count!"

The two stood a moment looking dead square at each other, smiling in the way of two tough, but weary, old friends at parting. Then they shook hands, moved down the steps together, and turned their separate ways.

At Dwyer's, Phyfe glanced into the lobby, took a draw of his cigar and tossed it out into the dust. Then he stepped over it and ducked under the hitchrail, and moved toward the center of the street. Eighty feet upstreet, Douglas was almost in time with him.

Douglas shook his head once with a tough man's tickled fondness for a friend and called down, "No sirree, haven't changed one damned bit!" and wigwagged.

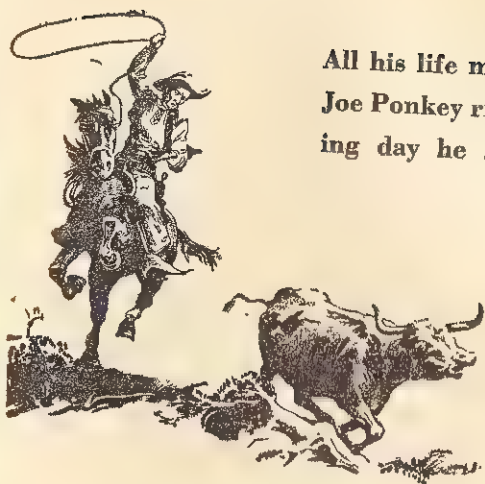
They both drew and they both fired at the same instant. Douglas sagged slowly forward, half twisted, and dropped into the dust. Phyfe ran upstreet and knelt over him and saw he was not dead, but would be.

In a burst of sudden remorse he grated, "I could have missed and the sun would have been on us!"

"No sirree, son," Douglas said huskily. A proud smile tore across his lips. "That's yore way and what makes you. It is why I brought you across that gorge instead of just letting the rope slip." He gave a grin and died.

Somebody raced over and stared and yelled, "Hell, it's Jack Douglas, that hired gun hand and last of the Ambers bunch! How did you know him, Phyfe?"

"Well," Phyfe answered. A hot hardness gripped his throat. "As well as I'll ever know any man." ● ● ●



All his life men had been glad to see Joe Ponkey ride away—until the flaming day he shot his way to Glory!

ORNERY COWBOY

by Raymond S. Spears

A BABY boy was born in a shack on Snake River, just below Jackson's Hole. His parents were homesteaders, but Short Ponkey, his father, spent most of his time trying to catch coyotes, wolves and bears, which knew more than he did. At its best the homestead could never have supported a family on stock or crops. Nevertheless, the baby, called Joe Ponkey, grew up along the river bottoms and up the rough slopes of the neighboring mountain ranges. He learned to ride on calves, but if there had been sheep around he would have become a sheep-

herder. He just managed to become a cowboy. The V-Connected outfit hired him when he was ten years old, and he held a small herd of cows over in the Hoback Basin, keeping them from straying. This was all the education he had tending cows.

Joe was a homely kid, with thick lips, an underslung chin and a sloping forehead. He'd learned cows. He'd ride around and among a band of cattle, until he knew them all by sight, cows, calves, steers, heifers. He knew dozens, scores, hundreds of head by sight. He gave names to the ones that were dis-

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ORNERY COWBOY

tinctive. He shook his head, when he saw a calf galumphing around, like a lamb gamboling. Those lively calves grew up hard to manage. Sometimes a heifer or steer went bad. Joe knew the symptoms. He could tell if a steer wasn't putting on weight, and he worried about a cow if she wasn't taking the right care of her calf.

Joe rode for ranches when his father and mother were starved out of their homestead. The government never ought to have let a man homestead those lands where even a mile square wouldn't give a family a living by growing stock or raising crops. After spending fourteen years of their lives on that place, eking out with game meat, furs, and wild hides, Mr. and Mrs. Ponkey vanished from that part of Wyoming. They had lost track of Joe. Somebody said he'd gone down to the Union Pacific with a trail herd of beef and hadn't come back. Joe had taken up with some men who were picking up horses to run through Trail Creek Pass into Idaho, for selling.

Joe's split on the divvy surprised him. Come to find out, he'd been riding with horse thieves.

"I ain't no thief!" Joe told himself, and frightened, headed east clear over the Big Horn Mountains, where he got a job on Senator Haydee's ranch. Brutt Cole, the senator's manager just happened to need a rider like Joe, somebody to run small bunches of special cows that needed looking after. Joe could take care of two hundred head. He was real good at attending Hereford bulls, brought in to breed up the quality of the herd. Joe had been known to ride out with cows in a valley pasture

for a whole month, never seeing anyone, and for that matter never wanting to see anyone.

Other riders couldn't make Joe Ponkey out. Joe didn't talk enough to become eloquent. He never cared for liquor. Only when he wanted boots or a new saddle, or some hard candy, did he draw his pay. When he drew his time from the Haydee outfit, Cole handed him eleven hundred dollars cash in gold coins.

"Dog—gone!" Joe blinked. "Is that all for me?"

Joe wore the gold around his waist in a money belt made of horsehide. The weight and jiggling bothered him. He had thirty or forty pounds of gold when he was near thirty years of age. When he changed the place where he hung his hat, he would go out into the near hills or mountains and pick up his cache, swing the money on a pack horse and ride on his way to some other job out yonder. Even money never got Joe a pal or a friend.

He worked over Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and down into Colorado. He didn't like Colorado much—too many sheep. Yet from the proud eminence of riding herd to cows he felt he would like to try tending sheep, some time. Sheep grazed away up high on the mountain-sides. Joe had gone over high passes, and always he had stopped to gaze at the valleys behind and ahead of him.

If a man looked a thousand years he'd never see all they is to see! he reflected. Sheep climb higher'n cows—a herder oughta see more'n a cowboy. . . . This was about the limit of Joe Ponkey's thinking.

HIS MONEY was a nuisance, all that load of gold. The word was around that Joe had saddle pokes full of yellow coin. A bad, mean element watched Joe, off and on, trying to catch him when he was moving his hoard into new country. Somehow, Joe never let anyone know when he was changing base, going to learn a new pasture, different grass, a range that he'd heard had interesting peculiarities. As a boy he got to know coyotes and gray wolves, tricky, mean, sure-bright scoundrels! His own furtive, unpredictable ways came from watching the raiders of the ranges. If a killer-wolf tried to raid cows for which Joe was responsible, it was a sorry day for the rogue. Joe had found a revolver when he was a small boy. He could shoot it with either hand, and he carried a carbine in his saddle boot, ready for business.

Joe Ponkey didn't tie in with anyone. He never had a pal. He was an odd number, the queer Dick, wherever he joined an outfit. He saved his money because his personal wants were few and rare. He heard the boys talking about money—if they only had a lot of money, so they could buy a ranch, or a store or have one dandy spree all the way from San Francisco to Boston or New York! Thus money came to mean quite a lot to Joe Ponkey. He held on to his. He didn't know what he wanted to do with it, except hide it out, cache it where no one could find it but himself.

Joe Ponkey was paid top-hand wages. If he wasn't he moved on. Yet he was an exasperation, dull, stupid, no 'count outside of his cow *sabe*. He wolfed his

grub noisily at the kitchen table. His eyes stared with vacant lack of interest, giving his mates the willies and making them throw wet socks or boots or pieces of stove wood at him. He'd duck like a badger or flop like a prairie dog, snapping his jaws shut with a queer, audible click.

"What the devil you thinking about?" somebody asked him.

"Huh, me think?" he answered, swallowing his adam's apple.

Next to Butch Cassidy and Tom Horn and the sheep problem, Joe Ponkey became known and drawn into discussion throughout his range and even farther. There he was, just one of thousands of riders, and perhaps he was the least accomplished of all men who tended cows. Trail herding he was awkward and never just where he ought to be, but sure to ride in and get in the way of the other riders. He'd been known to throw a rope at a horse and draw the noose tight on his foreman's waist, dragging him. He never went to town to celebrate anything. He didn't know the face cards of a poker deck. If somebody read a newspaper aloud, Joe would take the paper and study it upside down or cornerways, immensely interested in what he called the talking-figures branded thataway.

Joe Ponkey stayed a season on some ranches; on others he stayed for years. When he rode on he didn't explain why he was leaving.

"I just got the notion!" he would say.

And when he came riding on a ranch, it was apt to be out of the hills, or emerging from valleys where there was

no trail but game runways. If he didn't quit he was fired—by men sick of the sight of him!

"Gawda'mighty, here comes Joe Ponkey!" a rider would say, looking up from washing behind his ears and seeing Joe approaching with horses that proved his lack of horse *sabe*. Yet this was too much to say, for Joe had just exactly the right horses for the kind of work he could do; namely, tending brands of cattle a manager wanted to keep separate. Thus Joe Ponkey would ride herd on the culls of a ranch, or special shipments of blooded bulls, or cuts of high grade steers for a certain market.

Riders who couldn't stand Joe would ride away when he came in. Sometimes Joe would have to move on because he gave the other men in the crew what was called the willies. Joe never protested. Thrown out, he'd pack and saddle and ride away, never looking back, never answering when curses of conscience and regret and good riddance followed him.

"I never mean no harm!" Joe would say. "Course, if'n I ain't wanted—"

Ranchers, foremen, riders and cooks would watch Joe Ponkey ride away with twisting features, cursing aloud or under their breaths, watching a poor devil of a lackwit till he was out of sight, when they wouldn't watch the best horseman a hundred yards after he'd drawn his time. Butch Cassidy himself couldn't attract more attention, some claimed. Butch, the great Wyoming rider and outlaw, rode from below Kaycee clear down to western Colorado one autumn when he was going to a climate his

clothes would fit. Joe was going that way, too, so the two rode together.

"It's so!" Butch declared. "That scoundrel had thirty pounds or so of gold in his saddle pokes."

"You needed money, Butch," a listener said in Rock Springs. "How come you didn't he'p yo'se'f?"

"I thought of it," Butch admitted, "but you know, damn me if I could take advantage of Joe Ponkey. He's kinda daffy. Reckon I got Injun blood in me. Yo' know, Injuns neveh bother anybody that's wrong in the mind—crazy."

Other outlaws were not that superstitious, but Butch was never mean to fellow riders, and Joe Ponkey never harmed anybody. Joe Ponkey didn't like the Arizona-New Mexico cow country. He couldn't stand a land where it took a hundred acres to feed one cow, like on the pasture he worked. He headed back for the land of curly grass and strong gramma. He'd been gone more than two years. The Wyoming and Montana ranges had changed. Plowmen and sports and fugitives from the Middle West had come crowding in. The big ranches were under hard pressure from politics, thieves, and settlers. When a ranch introduced a hundred pure-bred beef bulls, it was lucky if thirty or forty of the special stock showed in the roundups a year later. Homesteaders, nesters, cattle thieves would take away a bull or two at a time and hide them back in the badlands, and use them for breeding up the culls, or whatever a sneak outfit had in the pasture.

Joe Ponkey was needed. The great Fork Horn outfit had had every thor-

WESTERN STORY ROUNDUP

oughbred bull it had imported, fifty-five in number, taken out of its pasture. Three cowboys had ridden out looking for missing bulls, and they never came back. Two were found dead. The third was rumored to have been run out the country—allowed to go when he promised to be good.

Joe Ponkey had never lost any cows of the herds he had tended. Boy and man, he'd go hungry before he'd leave beef or breeders untended. The word was that he would never bother about himself, but he'd come shooting if trouble troubled his charges in the outlying pastures of an outfit.

The Fork Horn had a hundred bulls coming in. Warcry Wansey, the rancher, was going to get his stock bred up or know the reason why! If he'd get by with forty or fifty of his hundred bulls, he'd feel satisfied. He sure despised Joe Ponkey. Joe had worked for the Fork Horn outfit twelve or fifteen years before. He was good, watching small bunches of cows, but he got on Warcry Wansey's nerves with that open-mouthed, hang-jawed, bug-eyed stare of his.

Fired, Joe had ridden away. He didn't sit straight up in his saddle when he left. He had his stirrup straps a little too short and he humped down over his middlehorn. He snuffed as he rode away, wiping his nose on his shirt sleeve. A whipped dog never sneaked away from an angry master more sorry, humiliated and surprised than Joe Ponkey. Joe never did get used to being fired, though many a rancher sent him away because of that vacant and home-like face.

But even Warcry couldn't forget Joe Ponkey, who had never lost a cow when it was given him to tend. There were a hundred bulls to be trailed to the Fork Horn pasture, and out around were homesteads and nesting outfits, where grinning, quiet and lawless men were waiting. Cows were selling for thirty-odd dollars, and here were coming a hundred bulls, for each of which any fence for live breeders would give a hundred dollars. Warcry Wansey had plunged, for he had made the mistake of letting buyers throw buck culls instead of making them take the bottom of the herd, rather than the top—the cream of his beef. The hundred bulls were Warcry's hope of staying in the big pasture profession.

WARCRY HUMBLLED his pride. He found out that Joe Ponkey was coming north, through Rawlins, looking for a job in the Powder River country. Warcry saddled his best horse, put a pack on his second best, and headed out to find Joe. Joe had gone through Casper, or rather around the town. He'd crossed over to Bear Creek, and then stopped at Moss on Antelope Creek. He'd headed out on the road toward Sussex, but left the trail and nobody knew where he went. Warcry circled, for when Joe left a trail it was a sign he was getting ready to cache his gold and find a job.

Joe was aware he was being followed. When Warcry Wansey came through Small Pass, he was suddenly stopped short by a bullet hissing just ahead of his horse. "Listen, mister!" Joe hailed him. "I don't want to be trailed!"

Warcry told him he had trailed him two hundred miles.

"I want you to work for me," Warcry said.

Joe shook his head. "Yo' fired me. Yo' said yo' neveh in God's world wanted to see my face again!"

Warcry told it on himself. He begged Joe Ponkey's pardon, and he took back all the things he'd ever called that hang-jawed, vacant-staring cowboy.

"Yo' hurt my feelin's, Mist' Wansey," Joe said, "but hit's all right now. I worried about that. I always worry when I'm fired. I cain't ever fo'git I wa'n't all right. Course, all I know is cows!"

"You never lost a cow for anybody," Wansey said. "That's why I'm begging yo' to ride pasture herd to my thoroughbred bulls, Joe."

So the two rode short-cutting back to the Fork Horn Ranch. The ranch occupied the Stillwater Creek valley. Into the creek flowed spring runs and up on the runs were spreads where beaver ponds had been filled with silt and sediment, and were now grown to rich lush grass patches. From these filled-in ponds the Fork Horn had lost nobody knew how many beef animals, and there fifty-bulls had vanished.

Up the Stillwater rode Joe Ponkey, with a hundred prime thoroughbred beef bulls.

Warcry Wansey sent him out a wannigan wagon, like a shepherd's, to live in. Joe liked the wannigan wagon idea. Nobody else would live with him in that wandering cabin. Nobody would get the willies looking at him. All he had to do was look after the

bulls, and keep them from fighting over the cows that were thrown up the creek to pasture with the thoroughbreds.

"Of course, Mist' Wansey, them bulls'll scatter out," Joe explained what Wansey already knew. "I've watched bunches of bulls, course. When theh's a hundred bunches—bulls an' their cows, I don't know. I'd hate awful to dis-'point yo' afteh yo' give me a second tryout!"

All through that country the word was around that Warcry Wansey had brought back Joe Ponkey to watch his bulls. This word was bandied about the ballrooms, gambling dens and dance halls. Cowboys and ranchers knew what it meant. Homesteaders, nesters and fly-by-nights heard the name Joe Ponkey but it meant nothing to them—just another cowboy in the rumors. What did interest them was the fact that Warcry of the Fork Horn outfit had brought in a hundred bulls. That was news they could use—*hue-e-e!* A hundred prime bulls!

Warcry Wansey personally took pack horse loads of supplies up the creek to keep Joe Ponkey stocked up. Joe was never at the wannigan wagon, but Wansey never got out the valley before Joe came on his shambling, awkward, yet first class cow horse.

Joe reported all there was to tell about each and every bull and their bunches of cows. Joe told when he had to chase a stray or throw bunches apart, if they got too close. He made sure that his employer knew all the details. Under any other circumstances, Wansey would have been bored by the multiplicity of items. Now he knew more

about that part of his pasture than he'd ever known before—about the grass and how the she-stock was feeding, and how some of the bulls went oftener to the block salt than others. Warcry even learned the names and distinctive marks of each bull—Old Prodder, Shorttail, Sidestepper, Scatter Cow, and so on.

"If Joe had any brains I'd make him foreman," Warcry Wansey declared, "but all he knows is cows, and the boys can't stand him!"

Riders came in from town and said there was talk about the hundred bulls. There would be. The bull-stealers would not overlook that bet. The plowmen, the squatting nesters, an evil-looking class of strangers had come in, and sooner or later Warcry knew he'd hear from them up the creek where Joe Ponkey was riding herd to his breeders. Once in a while, with nothing else to do, Warcry sent good men riding the line around the rim of the creek basin, looking for suspicious signs. Now and then a rider had crossed that line from out yonder. Perhaps these men were passers-by; perhaps they were looking over the pasture for good loot to rustle.

WARCRY AND Tom Prunce, his foreman, rode up the creek with supplies for Joe. Some steers had wandered up that way, shippers, and these would have to be rounded down the creek when beef was being sold. Joe wasn't at the wannigan. Warcry rode out north and Prunce rode south, looking up the creek feeders. The foreman found Joe at the upper beaver flae fill. Joe was lying face down behind a boulder.

ORNERY COWBOY

Bullets had gone through Joe from front to back, five shots; then his left arm was broken, but he'd worked his carbine with his right hand. He had been dead three or four days.

Foreman Prunce galloped up a hill, where he could shoot, and the sound would carry across the Sweetwater. He fired three double shots and built a smoke fire. Warcry saw the smoke and came running. He found his foreman at the upper of the flae, looking things over. Sign showed five men. They'd been riding, driving bulls. There were the tracks of horses and bulls. The horses, still wearing leather, were grazing around, and three bulls were in the grass, having stayed where they were caught by the shooting.

The horses of the rustlers were out around. Two had blotted brands, and three belonged to settlers—two nesters and a homesteader. Of the five men, Warcry and Prunce knew three, the nesters and homesteader. All had carried long guns and revolvers. They had jumped off their horses to shoot it out with Joe Ponkey. He'd got the five, despite the mortal wounds they gave him.

Tom Prunce rode to the ranch for a buckboard and riders. Warcry Wansey stayed with what was left of Joe Ponkey. Joe lay with his ear to the ground. He wore old blue levis and a pair of good boots; his shirt was red and yellow, inch-square colors, a fine hickory, and there was his hat with two bullet holes through it, lying where it had fallen.

When Prunce reached the ranch house, he found Sheriff Haddams and

two deputies. They'd come looking around, having heard there might be business at the Fork Horn. This was luck. When the buckboard went out the sheriff was along officially. They found Warcry sitting there, oblivious to the surroundings—staring at that thick-lipped, jut-nosed face with sloping brow and chin—muttering.

The sheriff and his deputies, all the Fork Horn riders stared, too—ten times as long at Joe Ponkey as at the five men who had come raiding the bulls that Joe had taken care of. Lying there, his hand gripping his empty rifle, none of those men had ever seen a man to equal Joe Ponkey. All his life he'd lived alone. He was so lonesome he could never even spend the money he had earned. His cache of gold was somewhere out around—half a hundred weight of it, perhaps.

"Doggone, he stayed with them bulls!" somebody exclaimed.

They took Joe Ponkey's body to the ranch on the buckboard. They wouldn't even take the rustlers in on the same load. They sent to town for a coffin, a genuine, fancy, citified box and inside coffin. This was Warcry's order. "The best one in town." The coffin was fit to

bury a ranch owner himself. Then they had a preacher who was riding circuit and he came to preach a sermon, giving Joe Ponkey a funeral, right!

Word that Joe Ponkey had been killed, and how it was, spread all over those parts. Cowboys left their ranches, led by their managers and owners. From town came gamblers, bartenders and their ladies. The word seemed to travel by courier, for there were men who came riding in, smoking the dust, to arrive in time to see Joe Ponkey buried that afternoon which the coroner had set for the funeral, and the jury had brought in the verdict:

"Died, defending the Fork Horn bulls!"

There they were, a thousand cowmen and horsemen, some nesters and homesteaders, and the town folks, doing honor, giving credit to that cowboy who never amounted to shucks, except that he did know cows, small bunches if they were off by themselves.

Doggone, it's a funny old world! Who would ever have suspected that Joe Ponkey would have the biggest funeral ever, out there in the big mountain pasture? Even after he was dead, Fork Horn bulls were safe. ● ● ●

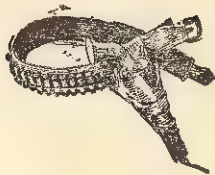
The Flight of The Brave

It may or may not be that the crueller of the Indians were as stoic as their reputation implied. But the fate of five Apaches, taken prisoner by the Texas Rangers, suggests they had some mighty powerful control.

Captors and captives had made camp one night, on their way back to civilization and justice, and the Indians were in irons. They had no weapons. They had only one way of escape. In the morning, the rangers discovered they had taken it.

With his own hands, each prisoner had strangled himself to death with the only means he had—his breechcloth.

BULLET CROSSING



A bullet was Trent White's hole card
—one last draw from a boothill deck!

by Clark Gray

TRENT WHITE had counted on a few minutes rest before the interview with Dale Young and Julia. But today it took fifteen minutes longer than usual to inspect the kitchens; the chef had lost the weekly menu in some mysterious fashion. Trent White had to call the menu up out of the recesses of his mind where he kept such things.

Leaving the kitchens, he moved hurriedly past the piled freight to the fore-castle of the river steamer, *Summer Maid*, then up the steep stairway to the boiler deck. And there it was, Captain, when do we reach Willow Falls? Captain, I believe there's an overcharge on my freight bill. Captain, have you met my wife? Captain, sir, the steward wants to know where you had the extra towels stored. Captain this and Captain something else.

BULLET CROSSING

He slipped away, finally, and climbed to the hurricane desk with his nerves thumping. The off-duty pilot had a complaint about the food. Trent White went through that, and then entered his cabin with a weary sigh of relief. He sat down on the bunk and began to unlace his shoes. He was a slightly balding man of twenty-eight, a big man with bloodshot sleepless eyes, but impeccable as always in his stiff uniform and white shirt. A knock sounded. Groaning, Trent White retied his shoelaces, straightened his necktie, and opened the door. Confronting him were Jeb Blake, Dale Young, and Julia.

"Morning, Trent," Jeb Blake said. "You sent a boy for us?"

Captain Trent White nodded and mentally braced himself. He motioned the three inside, closed the door, crossed to his desk.

He got out sherry and bourbon.

"That barroom of yours!" Jeb Blake sat down with a grunt. "Trent, I made the mistake of trying some French brandy, down there. What kind of dynamite is that stuff?"

Trent grinned. "I think I know the formula, Jeb. Burnt peach stones, cod liver oil, nitric acid, and new Kentucky whisky. You ought to stick to bourbon. Bourbon's the only safe drink on a riverboat."

JEB BLAKE was a paunchy, seedy man in a wrinkled seersucker suit. Dale Young, who sat beside Blake now, was short, blocky, dressed in lawyer black. Young was evil tempered, ambitious. He had black curly hair that came down too close to his nose, making him appear as if he had very little forehead. But of the three, Trent White was most aware of Julia.

Julia was still beautiful. The blond hair coiled atop her head added to that air of calmness, of complete poise that had first attracted Trent White. As if nothing in the world could touch her. Julia gave Trent her slow, questioning smile, and Trent felt himself redden faintly.

Coughing, he poured whisky for the two men and sherry for Julia. And then there were words to find. Trent seated himself in his swivel chair and pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing thumb and fingertip into his tired eyes. The gesture was soothing; he framed his thoughts with care. He said:

"I've asked the three of you here in the hope of avoiding trouble. I'll have to put this in my own way, now." He

hesitated. "I've owned this boat, the *Summer Maid*, for three years. I've made nine trips from St. Louis to the upper gold fields, and twenty-three short runs. Before that, I was a pilot for six years. And I'm only just learning what a steamboat is. Jeb, you know what a steamboat is?"

"Sure." Jeb Blake grinned. "A steamboat is a mess of wood and iron and contrary people, all put together to give her captain trouble."

"It's more than that," Trent White said soberly. "A steamboat is a machine made to carry people and goods. It carries them across water. But here's the point—" White shot a glance at Dale Young, caught his dark frown. "A steamboat isn't any good to anybody till it touches land."

"Quit sparring," Dale Young growled. "Get on with what you've got to say, White."

"All right, Dale." Trent White put his eyes on Young, and kept them there. "You own the wharf at Willow Falls. You also own river-front property in Indian Point and Mission Ridge. I've a notion you're trying for a strangle hold on upper river traffic. I won't stand for that, Dale."

"Oh?" Dale Young's frown blackened. "And why Jeb? Where does he come in?"

"He's mayor of Willow Falls. I want him to know what's going on."

"I see," Dale Young snapped. "You're making a mistake, White. There's no law says I can't own as much property as I can get—and charge what wharfage I choose. You don't have to do business with me. Tie up in the middle of the

river and discharge your freight by row-boat, if you don't like my smell."

"Maybe I will," Trent White said. "But property right works two ways, Dale. Remember that."

The whistle sounded for Willow Falls at that moment, and Trent White had to leave. He gave his stiff ceremonious captain's bow to the three of them, indicated the bottles on his desk, and moved out onto the hurricane deck. He climbed the ladder to the pilothouse; and taking the wheel from the pilot, he swung the *Summer Maid* out of the channel toward Willow Falls.

The town lay sleeping quietly in the brilliant humid sunlight. It was a small town, originally a fur-trading post, but dying now on its feet. Trent White steamed past Dale Young's rotting yellow wharf. He jingled the bells for half speed. Below him, on the hurricane deck, he heard a surprised murmur of voices, and he grinned. The pilot, behind him, swore in amazement. Trent White said:

"Mr. Bixby, I'm owner of a new wharf in Willow Falls. You'll need to remember its location, if you please."

* * *

When he reached the old abandoned warehouse, he touched the bells again, calling for low speed, then reverse. The *Summer Maid* came to a churning stop, her bow six feet from the muddy bank.

Calmly, Trent White leaned out of the pilothouse and located the mate staring at him from the hurricane deck. Trent said, "Mr. Malone, rig the capstan and stand by to throw a line ashore.

I have a floating wharf in that warehouse up the hill."

The slab-sided old warehouse lay at the top end of the lot that fronted the river. It had held furs once, years ago. It was rickety and leaky now, but it would hold river freight. Trent White saw a figure move out of the warehouse, and he knew this was Lee Caldwell, the crippled old barsweep he had hired. Behind Caldwell came a half dozen dock hands.

Trent White treated himself to the luxury of a silent grin. One element of his plan had been surprise. For the first time he took his eyes off the boat and warehouse, glancing back over the town. Downstream a half block, the usual crowd of loafers and roustabouts who watched every steamboat landing were standing on Dale Young's wharf. Amazed, they were shouting, gesticulating. Then Trent White gave his attention to the business of landing.

It was not a very complicated business. But it was unusual for this time and place. The mate threw a line ashore. Lee Caldwell's six helpers put their backs and brawny legs to the line, hauled it uphill to the warehouse. Inside the warehouse, Lee Caldwell attached the line to the crude floating pier—which Trent had ordered constructed secretly out of barrels, cottonwood logs and plank lumber.

Then it was back water for the *Summer Maid*, and heavy on the capstan; the flat monster came sliding down the high mud bank to enter the Missouri with a thundering splash. When it was done, and the wharf was anchored solidly to the bank, Trent White moved her

gently into place and blew the landing signal. He turned, aware that he was sweating slightly. Julia had entered the pilothouse behind him, a half empty glass of sherry in her hand.

"Dale is furious," she said, smiling. "You're going to have a fight on your hands, Trent."

Trent White grinned, relaxed now. He waited till the pilot, Bixby, had left the pilothouse, then he leaned against the wheel and studied Julia. Julia's eyes were curious; she was appraising him, and it occurred to Trent that this action of his had surprised her.

"It's been a long time, Julia. A year, isn't it? A year ago, you and I were engaged to be married. Now it's Dale Young. Times change, eh?"

"They do, indeed." She set down her sherry glass with a little click. She said, "Trent, you walked out on me. I never knew why. It didn't make much difference then, because I—thought you were rather spineless. But now—well, why did you leave me?"

"You really want to know?" He moved to the bench opposite the wheel. He sat, drawing one knee up under his chin and hooking his heel to the bench edge. An undignified position, he thought. But he'd never tried to be dignified with Julia. "Maybe I'm just fiddlefooted."

"No, you're putting me off. Tell me. Was it because you thought I wanted a rich husband?"

Trent shook his head. "There is ambition in you, Julia, but not for money. You have a craving for—well, strength."

"Indeed?" She smiled. "A phrenol-

ogist, no less. You want to study the bumps on my head, Trent?"

Trent grinned, liking her. "Laugh if you want, Julia. You asked me, and I told you." He lit a cigar. "When's the big wedding to come off?"

"In a month, I guess. I don't know—maybe never. I'm not too sure of Dale."

"He's a driving man," Trent said. "He'll be big some day, if he. . . ."

"Yes. If he stays honest. Trent, listen. Why are you fighting Dale? It isn't the money."

Trent said slowly, "No, it isn't. There's no money for me in Willow Falls. It's hard to explain, Julia."

"Why don't you quit steamboating? You can't fool me, Trent. I know riverboats, and I know the *Summer Maid* has been making you rich. Hasn't it?"

He nodded, not trying to lie. "I have about a hundred twenty thousand dollars banked in St. Louis. Plus my other assets, the boat, a little land, one thing and another. I've thought of quitting."

"You wouldn't have to fight Dale, then. Believe me, Trent, you won't whip him easily."

A knock sounded on the pilothouse door. Trent rose and opened it, somewhat grateful for the interruption. Malone, his mate, confronted him worriedly.

"Caldwell's dock hands quit on him, Captain. There's eighteen hundred pounds of freight sitting on the wharf, with no way to get it up the hill into the warehouse."

WITH AN effort, Trent White forced his mind into its necessary acrobatics. He put Julia back into the dim

recesses of thought, where she belonged. He brought forward his experience with boats and men and cargoes. He put a stiffness into his shoulders, and he turned courteously, then, to Julia and said:

"I'll send a cabin boy to show you off the boat. We'll be leaving in ten minutes or so."

He stalked down the promenade, followed by Malone. He was a captain again, every inch of him. He noted with relief that most of the passengers were grouped around the larboard rail, watching the floating wharf. He reached the gangplank unobserved. On the wharf he saw crippled Lee Caldwell, Jeb Blake, and Dale Young. Trent White said over his shoulder to the mate:

"Mr. Malone, I never saw a deck passenger yet who wouldn't shoulder a box to earn a rebate on his fare. Rustle me up a half dozen healthy-looking men. Get them out here and get this freight moved. And hurry. This delay is expensive as hell."

He heard the mate's respectful answer, and he stepped down the gangplank. Lee Caldwell, a bent old man with missing teeth, hobbled forward anxiously.

"Cap'n, my boys just up and quit. I couldn't do nothing. Honest! This scalawag of a Dale Young told 'em there'd be no jobs in Willow Falls for any man stayed on the wharf three minutes. Can't blame 'em, I reckon, eh?"

Trent White said kindly, "Don't worry about it, Lee. You did a good job," and he pushed on. Dale Young had a smirk on his dark face. Jeb Blake

was swabbing his neck with a soiled handkerchief.

Dale Young growled, "No law been violated, White."

Trent said, "Not yet. But you're standing on private property, Dale. I'll have to charge you wharfage if you don't move. And it will be high, Dale."

Dale Young's heavy face purpled with irritation. He glanced at Jeb Blake, saw the mayor's grin, and reluctantly he moved to the edge of the muddy lot. That put him out of hearing. Jeb Blake grunted.

"I'm beginning to see why you rung me in on this, Trent. You're goin' to need me."

"I think so. How about your law, Jeb? Is your marshal honest?"

"He's honest." Jeb Blake swabbed his damp face with his handkerchief. "But he don't need a hat to keep his brains from frying in the sun. Hell, Trent, you understand I'll try to protect your property. But Dale—you know him. He's got big ideas since he engaged himself to that St. Louis girl."

"Uh-huh. I know." Trent White turned to old Lee Caldwell.

"Lee, like I said, you did fine. I hired me a good man when I hired you. You remember the rest of it?"

"I remember, Cap'n." Lee Caldwell was one of those who'd been buffeted by life; Trent's words put a worshipful gratitude into the old man's eyes. "I'll be ready. I'll be waitin'."

Trent said, "Good enough," and then it was time to show the deck hands where to store the freight. Ten minutes later, Trent was backing the *Summer Maid* slowly out into the channel

Thirty minutes later he was giving careful instructions to Malone, the mate. An hour later he was hidden in the middle of a buckbrush thicket, a mile up the river, and he checked his pistols.

And now, Trent White knew, he needed luck. He didn't believe in luck; he had never before relied on luck in building his career. But he had to have it now. It had to be tonight that Dale Young would try to burn the warehouse.

* * *

That Young *would* try to burn him out was very obvious to Trent. Young would have to burn him out or lose his chance for a strangle hold on the upper river. And that strangle hold would be worth thousands, if Young could get it.

It was a matter of profits, Trent White knew. Normally, profits went to the man who earned them. But if Dale Young could control landing points, he could control profits by the simple expedient of raising or lowering wharfage dues. He could thus drain shipowners to the breaking point.

That was why Trent was fighting back. That was why he'd slipped off the riverboat, leaving the mate with instructions to run upriver a few miles, then shut down on the excuse of a leaky boiler. Tomorrow the boat would retrace its trip, and Trent would again assume command. If, he amended, he was still alive and healthy.

He waited until an hour before sunset. Then he rose, stuffed his two pistols into his belt, and moved toward Willow Falls, keeping in the thickets that fringed the river.

The old warehouse stood at the north edge of town. Underbrush crept to within a few feet of the huge front doors. Trent White had marked his spot a month ago. As darkness drifted over the little community, he stepped quietly into place, making certain that no one saw the movement. He checked the priming of his guns.

Voices drifted out of the town. A restaurant two doors downstreet was the most active spot. Its door opened now and then, casting a rectangle of yellow light across the sandy road. Trent White hunkered patiently on his heels.

At nine o'clock the warehouse door opened, and crippled Lee Caldwell's bent figure shuffled toward the restaurant. This was according to the plan. At nine ten, a lean, straw-hatted man with a bit of metal shining in his suspender button ambled up from town to inspect the warehouse. This was not according to plan. This would be Jeb Blake's constable, Trent thought, and he swore soundlessly.

But after a few moments of silent scrutiny the constable drifted back downstreet.

A slow wind stirred the leaves in the thicket above Trent's head. Then the wind died, the leaves stilled, but yet he heard a noise. He listened, and the muscles in his neck went tense. Faint footfalls sounded to his right.

Moving very carefully, Trent White disengaged one of the pistols from his belt.

The footfalls slipped closer. At that instant the restaurant door swung open, throwing its lighted rectangle across the

road. Silhouetted against it Trent could see the blocky figure of Dale Young; he heard Dale Young's stifled oath. The restaurant door slammed shut, and through some queer instinct Trent sensed this would be the marshal, going back toward the business district of town. After a moment, Dale Young's footfalls sounded again.

Young was approaching the blind side of the warehouse, the north.

Trent White rose with the utmost care to his feet, feeling for every leaf and twig with his hands. He could just peer over the underbrush when he finally came erect. The sound of gurgling liquid came from the warehouse, as if Dale Young were pouring something from a jug.

Then the rasp of a match. A low curse. A second rasp, and a spark that abruptly became a tiny flame pinched between Dale Young's stubby fingers. The flame touched a piece of wadded paper, caught it, and by the sudden light Trent White could see the black lubricating oil which Young had poured against the side of the warehouse.

Trent White said, "Let it burn, Dale. But don't run. You're in my pistol sights."

DALE YOUNG was facing the warehouse, one side to Trent. Trent could see Young's profile in the garish light of the flames as they caught the oil. Young's stubby black profile did not change, and because of this, Trent was unprepared for the derringer.

The derringer spit orange. Something beelike buzzed past Trent's head, cutting a leaf from the underbrush.

BULLET-CROSSING

Trent had just a moment to realize that the derringer had been a sleeve gun, that Dale Young had fired under his own left arm. Then Dale Young was plunging for the warehouse corner, running desperately. In a half second, he'd be around the corner and sheltered by darkness.

Trent fired. He felt the concussion of his own gun, felt it slam his palm, saw Dale Young twist in his course and run without reason direct into the warehouse wall.

The force of the blow made Trent White wince. He threw away his first pistol, drew the second from his belt. And then he saw he wouldn't need it. Dale Young turned away from the wall and walked three steps. The third step bent Young's leg forward and under him, because Young was falling. Trent White knew instinctively that the man was dead.

Mechanically, Trent White eased off the hammer of his second pistol. A great sadness, a guilt, touched off a sickness in him. He became vaguely aware of running, shouting forms around him.

Trent White had planned it all, except the killing. He had planned for crippled Lee Caldwell to be there, directing the fire-fighters to the barrels of water, the buckets, the two sacks, all of which were hidden in the warehouse. Lee Caldwell, Trent noticed, had a new pride in his voice. A beaten derelict, brought back to responsibility by an honest, trusted job. Trent White had planned that, too. Or hoped for it.

Jeb Blake was there, and his marshal. He, Trent, explained what had happened. The marshal verified his facts by

the state of the guns, the witnesses who'd heard the shooting from the restaurant, the hardware owner from whom Dale Young had bought the oil. The crowd of curious townspeople had their explanation, and presently Trent was sitting in the lamplit warehouse with old Lee Caldwell, and Lee had a bunk for him, and a late supper of coffee and sandwiches. Trent White was very tired, but he finished the sandwiches and drank the coffee.

A light knock sounded on the warehouse door.

"May I come in, Trent?" It was Julia's voice.

Julia had on a green dress. She'd been crying a little. Her yellow hair was piled atop her head, and she entered the old warehouse with all her beautiful grace of movement. Trent got to his feet, and, tired and jittery as he was, Julia seemed like water after a long thirst.

Julia said with a hint of a smile,

"Trent, I asked you to quit steamboating this morning. But you'll never quit, will you? You risked your life to keep traffic open on the upper river. I'm sorry, Trent. I—I just didn't understand."

He grinned. It was the first time he'd grinned in hours, he was certain. Julia did that. He said:

"You're learning, Julia. Learning what makes me tick."

"And what makes myself tick, too. Trent, there's nothing left for me in this town. I want to buy a passage from you. To St. Louis, via as far north as you're going."

She was really smiling now.

Trent noticed a twinkle in Lee Caldwell's faded old eyes. He set down his coffee mug and took a half step toward Julia. He said:

"That's a long trip, Julia."

"I know it," she said, and there was a definite promise in her eyes. "But Trent—these things take time." ● ● ●

Too Deadly to Duel

One of the strangest rendezvous in the history of outlaw trails took place between an Army scout and that infamous Indian scourge, the Apache Kid. At the time, the Kid was wanted for murder and worse, all over the Southwest.

The two men came face to face with one another unexpectedly, one hot morning in the wilderness. Each was alone. Each was carrying a single-shot rifle. They were deadly enemies, in the very nature of things, and they recognized it as soon as they recognized each other.

But neither man reached for his gun. To fire, and miss, meant death. Each man had only one shot.

And so they sat there, completely silent, in the hot sun, motionless, until dark fell—when both of them turned and lit a shuck into the boulders for help!

They never met again—men of action who had galvanized each other into motionlessness!

When his friends have to fight for his reputation,
a man's corpse, even if he doesn't know it. . . .

SUMMONS TO BOOTHILL

by Thomas Calvert

GIL MORGAN rode down hard out of the high Sangre de Cristos, and into Keystone. He got there just as the mountains were throwing their deep blue shadows across the town. The street was long, and he came full tilt, with chaps flaring and his hat brim plastered back above his broad-boned ruddy face. His coal black horse was lathered into an almost solid gray. He rode in the stirrups, with a free rein, using his quirt right up to his violent halt in front of the Dry Gulch saloon.

He hit dirt before his horse had dropped its forehoofs, and ducked under the hitchrack in one stride. On the walk he stopped with legs wide, testing the ease of his gun in its boot. His gray eyes sliced like rapiers across the idling crowd upon the stoop.

He was not big, as were most men in that country. But he had a broad, thick chest, and a suppleness to his movements, and a contained savagery

that made men stare and then quickly look away.

A graybeard said, "If yo're lookin' fer a sick friend, he's in yonder, mister."

Gil made a bare acknowledgement with his head, and tapped rapidly up the steps and through the batwig doors. He took in the crowd with one glance, and men moved aside to give him way.

From the back, Doc Weaver looked up and called, "Right here, Gil", and waited for Gil to pound across the sawdust. He stood up from beside a table, and gave Gil a long look. He said, "There's no more I can do for him. He's going. We'll leave you boys for a last palaver."

The doctor jerked his head and drew the circle of men up the bar. Gil stood there, staring, his fists clenched and black mayhem in his heart. On the table in front of him, Cole Lacey was stretched in a darkening pool of his own blood.

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Cole forced a grim smile to his gray-ing face. He said feebly, "Forget the pay-off, Gil. I been waitin' for you overlong. There's short time for talk."

Gil took the doctor's chair beside Cole's head. He forced a man's hard grin and said, "Fella, come sundown tomorrow and you'll be rarin' for a fresh fight!"

"Come sundown tonight," Cole corrected, "and I'll be pushin' up tomorrow's daisies! Well, pard, I don't mind going. But now that the time's come, I wish to hell I was going for some good reason! I just plain honed up this trouble for sheer hell."

"We've done our share of buryin'," Gil reminded him. "Leastwise, we can go out knowin' we're ahead of the game."

"We ain't going," Cole said. "That's what I been fightin' off the devil all day long to tell you."

He coughed the kind of cough that tore up from the very bottom of a man's soul. Pain wiped the smile off his face and left him spent. After a long, grasping pause, he pulled at his friend's shirt. He said in a dry, husky whisper, "Gil, I got ten thousand dollars on the hoof and a purty sister you think a heap of back in Calvaro County. They're both yores for the takin'. But you got to promise one thing first."

"Name it," Gil growled, his throat thick with feeling.

"You got to give up fightin'. Least, unless there's a real reason and you can't duck out."

Gil said, "That's easy. I never made trouble yet, unless some smart jasper was lookin' for it."

"The hell you ain't!" Cole scoffed. "We been ridin' together since we was colts. That's just why I'm sayin' this strict as gospel, Gil. Yo're like to marry Dulcie. And after me, Dulcie just can't take no more heartbreak. It'd be like to kill her to have a husband ridin' out the same way."

He was gasping, with a dry sob to his breath. There was an urgent plea in the ash of his once fiery eyes. His time was short; it was in the way death was etching deep lines across his pain-stricken face.

Gil swallowed and gave one single nod, and his hand found his friend's. "Okay, pard. That bargain stands with me. I'll make no fight and I'll take no fight without real reason again in my whole life. Not any kind of fight at all."

A look of peace spread across the other's face. He whispered. "That's all I ask. So long, pard. It's been a swell trail, ridin' with you." He smiled once more, and then took a long, weary breath and died.

GIL WAITED until the last earth was packed over Cole upon boot-hill. Then he asked of Doc Weaver, "Who did it?"

Doc shrugged. "Strangers. One had an S-scar on his left cheek." He scowled suddenly at some inward thought. "No danged reason for it a-tall! Started out joshing, got hot, went into a fist fight, and then it was guns."

Gil nodded. The same old story of men building a fight for pride and glory, and then somebody had to die. He had one bitter, passing thought of the

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fights the two of them had built that way. Then he nodded and mounted his horse and rode.

Calvaro County was a good piece over. It took him a full eight days to reach there. It was different country, and whatever stories of the shooting drifted in were liable to be distorted and third-hand. Gil told the boys in town that Cole had gone out shooting off a gang of raiders on his herd. It sounded better that way, as if a man had learned reason in the end.

He rode on out to Cole's ranch as sundown was putting its red and yellow hues down across the pastel hills. He saw Dulcie move out of the house with her long, lithe stride and stand against the post of the porch to wait.

Her hair was black as night, her eyes china blue against the dark beauty of her face. As she recognized him, her eyes shone with a forthright gladness. Her lips formed a little cry.

He swung out of the saddle and came toward her. The deep, swift feeling she brought up in him were things he could not keep from his face.

She cried, "Gil, you've come home!"

"Home!" he repeated and took both her hands, thinking that word had a special and beautiful sound coming from her lips.

She flushed and an excited pulse came from her finger tips. She had waited, and she knew he knew it, and she was not ashamed.

But now, suddenly, she lifted her level gaze to his. It was filled with a sharp alarm, and her face went white. She breathed, "It's happened!"

"What're you spouting about?" He

scowled. He wanted to break it easy.

"Don't stall!" she cried out bitterly. "First it was Pa, then Tom, then Bob, and now it's Gil! And not one went out with decent reason!"

"Somebody say that?" he inquired.

She shook her head, but a deep and aching certainty was in the bitter gesture. "No. But you never rode in alone before in all these years!"

She was fighting to control her grief, but it burst and she was sobbing out her broken heart against his chest. He held her there, his arms strong and gentle. After a space, her torn sobs slowed, and stopped. She turned away to dry her face.

He gave her time and then he asked, "Will you sit while I tell you how it was?"

For an instant her body stilled, and then she shook her head. "No. Let's ride out away from here. Let me hear it some place not haunted with all these tragic memories."

He got her horse and helped her to her saddle.

They rode out in silence for Sweet-water Shelf. They got down and she moved away from him, staring down into the purple-misted dusk that stole across Redmoon Valley. He sat upon a log and waited.

Finally her voice came, tight, but controlled with the iron of her pride. "All right, Gil. Let me have it straight."

It took a little time to work up the story, because all of the facts had to be created. Maybe the story itself wasn't much; it was simply that Cole had been grazing a herd he meant to drive east and sell in a high-priced market, and

that raiders had come, and Cole had gone down in the dust. But before riding west he had sent his love, and word that everything here was hers.

No, there wasn't too much to the story. But he told it with great simplicity, half believing it himself. Because Cole and this girl had filled his life, his feelings were in his voice.

When he finished, she stood a long time, letting the memories of years wash across her heart. The stars came out and bathed her with serene pale light. When she turned, he saw the shine of sadness in her eyes, but on her face had come a gentle peace. She murmured softly, "The only one to turn good before it was too late! But he was mother's favorite. Now she can rest!"

It brought a hard set to his jaw. But the lie had been for good. And at the very end, it was the way Cole would have chosen to push on if he had his chance to do it gain. In that much, at least, it was no lie.

SHE CAME over and sat beside him on the log. Holding his arm, she leaned her head against his shoulder in a natural way. There was, he thought, a good deal between them that was even closer than two lovers. It was a closeness such as had existed between both of them and Cole.

She said with a kind of emptiness to her voice, "I've always waited for you two to ride home. Even when we were little, when the others were alive, I never thought of life without you and Cole riding in at some unexpected hour and wanting supper."

He sat there, rolling a cigarette, feel-

ing the nearness of her and the deep things she meant to him. It crossed his mind that he had never thought it out before, but most of his life he had felt the same way. It was going to be tough to take, Cole's passing. It was going to be tougher if anything came between himself and Dulcie.

He struck a match to his cigarette and caught a flash of her wistful expression before he snubbed it. He said, awkwardly, "Dulcie, I am not much of a bargain. And a man can get things wrong when a woman has been his friend. But if you might want me in decent time, I will stick around."

He felt the sudden stillness of her hands upon his arm, the slight stiffening of her head. Like a sheet of lightning it went across his mind. I got things wrong!

Aloud, he said, "Or I can ride along."

He got no answer, and she made no further movement. He finished his smoke and ground it into the earth between his feet. He set his elbows on his knees and tried to keep the bitterness from his voice.

He said, "I have embarrassed you. It is that way, then, and I will ride at dawn."

"I have given no answer, Gil," she told him.

"You are not the kind to hurt a friend," he said.

"We have always talked out straight and plain," she murmured. "A friend is entitled to an answer and I will give it."

He steeled himself. He had lost half of life's meaning with the death of Cole. Now he was to lose the rest of it in these

next few seconds. He managed through thin lips, "Shoot!"

"It's fairly short and easy," she said. "Even you should see the way I feel."

He waited. He was still waiting when her arms came around his neck, and her lips were hard and full against his own. They pressed and they clung and they stayed until the iron stubbornness washed out of him.

He let her go after a long time. The moon was coming up at the valley end, a great red circle of savage hue. He said with a man's stirred thickness, "It is not going to be easy, living with a man like me."

"It is going to be awful," she agreed happily.

"But there will never be another for me, no matter how ornery I get."

She laughed as she told him, "There has never been another with me."

The light of the moon drifted onto his face. It was a fierce and pagan light and it suited the wildness of his mood. He said, "It is loco that a grown man feels this way. But it is something worth a lot to him to know!"

She drew closer to him. "With a woman, it is trust in a man's courage, the knowledge that no matter how tough things came, or how many were against him, her man would stand up and fight."

They stayed until the moon was high and yellow, and then rode home through the golden night. The hills they rode were filled with memories of Cole. But the bitter sadness of his passing was softened now. Something of him was all around them, and inside them, and between them like a spell.

SUMMONS TO BOOTHILL

That was in early May, and they planned the kettle banding for late June. Two weeks later, Gil had given her the diamond ring. It was a beauty, and he was being joshed about it at the Desert Bar.

Big Steve Brannigan was at the other end, drinking more than was good. Gil was not the cause of his drinking, but he was a thorn in Brannigan's side which grew in size with each drink. For Brannigan had come to think of himself as kingpin in that country. But since Gil Morgan's return, his own appearance in a bar was scarcely even noticed.

Brannigan was not only a giant, but he was tough. Filled with dutch courage, he could be dangerous—and he was loaded now. His small eyes were fiery red; his unshaven chin had a nasty jut. He was staring at Gil from down the bar. Each moment of his look had a more insulting aspect.

Ely Walters, who owned the local bank, was just grinning at the crowd. "I dunno but what I hadn't better go back and count my cash after Gil giving his lady that sparkler! Don't seem to me like there was that much mazuma in town!"

The crowd grinned and Reed Driscoll piped up, "Come clean and spill the story, Gil. Where's this gold mine you got hid up in them hills?"

This was between friends, and Gil grinned. "Could be I was a long rider."

"No chance," Blaine Howard scoffed. "Rustlin's hard work. Nobody ever caught you workin' hard that I recall. Now come on and tell!"

"Can't let you in on this secret," Gil allowed.

"Why can't he, huh?" Brannigan growled from down the bar. "It's some-thing a heap of us might like to know!"

A sharp and instant silence fell across the room. There were men who had said less than that to Gil Morgan and had not survived to regret it. Gil stiffened in that way of fighting men, and then recalled his promise. And so he simply turned with deliberate slowness, and shot Brannigan a contemptuous glance. He said:

"Brannigan, yo're not in this powwow. Stick to yore whiskey."

FOR THE moment, the metallic hardness of Morgan's voice sobered Brannigan into consideration of his error. He fell to mumbling into his glass.

Gil turned back and made a gesture that the incident was of no importance. The crowd breathed easier. A fight in that country might flare into a feud that involved every ranch. And nobody particularly wanted to go to war over some drunk's remark.

But four fast drinks later Brannigan had forgotten his discretion. Suddenly he came lurching down the bar, a nasty temper on his face. He stopped, swaying, and glared at Gil. He said thickly, "Mister, I asked a question and I still want to know why you can't answer."

For an instant, it looked like Gil would unleash one from the floor. The next, he did a thing few of them would have believed possible.

He said, "Boys, hobble this drunk!" And shouldering Brannigan off balance, he tapped out through the doors.

Brannigan came back on balance, cursing, and reached for his gun. The sher-

iff knocked down his arm and jerked his head. They ganged Brannigan into a seat until he'd cooled and Gil was well out of town.

Then Brannigan went lurching out of the bar, growling threats of what he meant to do to Gil Morgan.

There was a silence of a full minute, before Blaine Howard allowed, "That ain't like Gil. He had good cause for looping Brannigan like a reata. Wonder what's struck him?"

Ely Walters barked, "You ninnies, what's struck him is Miss Dulcie, and she's enough to strike some peace into the devil! Month before I roped me my woman, I dasn't even walk in a bar to wet my gullet."

There were grins and that covered it, but it caused talk. There were men on that range who had bitter memory of Gil's violence in the past. There were others whose profits might have been larger had they not been afraid of Gil and Cole.

They kept the talk alive, and they gave it a nasty edge.

The incident had taken place on a Monday. On Wednesday Leek Talbot knocked Denver Crisco in the dust for the way he spoke about Gil's new-found peaceful ways.

Sitting down there, Denver rubbed his jaw and growled, "Well, it's one hell of a thing when a man's friends have to fight to save his reputation!"

Crisco didn't cut any figure, but his remark did. Even Gil's friends considered that he would have to vindicate his honor at the first decent moment.

The following night Gil rode out to Dulcie's. He knew what the talk had

been. He knew there were people who had seen to it that she should hear it. He rode in a wry mood, not sure just how she was going to take this thing.

She gave him no quick action, but hummed snatches of song while getting supper, and over the table kept darting him glances of a woman's secret humor. He couldn't see much funny about anything, and the gossip was on his mind. He ate little, and his blood was full of salt.

Out on the porch she broke into sudden peals of laughter.

He turned and scowled and demanded, "What's so funny?"

"You," she told him. "You look like you ate a spider."

"I feel it," he answered.

Her laughter grew almost convulsed.

He jerked to his feet suddenly. Temper was in him like a prairie fire. He barked, "All right, I'll ride over and pulp him up and end this loco chatter!"

"Oh, cool off, Gil!" she cried. "Who cares what Brannigan does or doesn't do when he's drunk?"

"You sure find it powerful funny," he growled.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him back. "It's not that. It's just the idea of Wild Gil Morgan getting religion!"

She jerked him down and tapped him under the chin. "You really think I want my man brawling and gunning all over the place like—" A sudden catch and sadness came into her voice. "Like you used to?"

She put the comparison on him, but he knew she thought of Cole, and the others. It reminded him of his promise, and how close his temper had carried

him to breaking it. He set the promise afresh in his mind.

Leaving, she made it a little easier for him to keep. She said, "Gil, I don't care about the talk. If there's cause, you'll take care of things. But don't you let those wild galoots talk you into any hell-raising just for fun."

She lifted her face, and on it was the full plea of a woman's nature. He gave a hard grin and said, "Okay. That makes it double."

"Double?" she repeated.

He nodded, but he didn't answer. He simply took her into his arms, and his promise to her was in the gentle soberness of his kiss. He rode off leaving her stirred and yet oddly perplexed.

He drifted into the Desert Bar and, coming in, felt a ripple of interest move through the room. There were men who stopped talking and then started up again, and he knew they had been talking about him. He felt no lack of respect from these men, but he felt their curiosity. It galled him but it strengthened his determination. Hitching his belt, he moved down bar to stand by Ely Walters and Leek Talbot.

Leek greeted him with a grin but there was something on his mind. After due space, it came out. He said, "Gil, it ain't my business to go hornin' in. But there has been too much talk. It is going to swell Brannigan's head, and he needs it swelled in a different way."

Gil carefully put his glass down on the bar. He turned and looked at Leek. He said briefly, "Leek, I am gettin' married and aim to settle down. If I gave Brannigan what he asked for, there would be talk of another kind."

Elv intercepted, "That's just what's on our minds, Gil."

"Meaning?" Gil asked.

Leek looked embarrassed, and tossed off his drink. Then he growled, "Damn it, don't get riled about what I say. But I know Dulcie and how she feels. You go treein' any bears for sheer hell, and she is going to give you the devil. I've got no woman to worry on, and I've got reason of my own to want to tangle with Brannigan. So what I say is that I do a good job, and do it for us both."

Cold glints came into Gil's eyes. "H-m-m," he said. "So you've got reason too? Any objection to my knowin' what?"

Leek purpled and looked confused, and finally grunted, "Well, hell's fire, I used to ride with you and Cole!"

"We are still ridin' together, Leek," Gil said, "but I will handle my personal trouble the way I see fit."

He turned back to the bar and signaled a drink, which closed the matter. The strain of unspoken things was upon them. It dulled the fun of the evening, and soon Gil left.

LEELK gave the bar a thump that shivered its whole length. He barked for a whole bottle, and put down three fast drinks. He had just finished his third when Brannigan ripped into the place, not staggering tonight, but loaded to the hilt.

He stood in the middle of the floor and looked over the crowd. After a moment he gave a contemptuous growl and said, "Well, it looks like I can't bump into my friend Gil and ask him that question nohow! It even looks

right like he don't want to see me!"

Leek turned and moved out a half pace from the bar. He stood with his gun arm stiff and his head jutted forward, sheer mayhem in his eyes. His lips were flat against his teeth. He said on a flat note, "Brannigan, Gil's no friend of yores! Whatever you've got to say, you say to his face or you shut up!"

Caution crept into the boasting leer of Brannigan's bullying eyes. He said, "Them's big words, Leek!"

"I mean 'em big!" Leek cut back. "Big enough to spread that beefy carcass of yores from here to Kingdom Come if you let out one more little yip about Gil Morgan!"

Brannigan hesitated at this flat front. He considered the murderous look in Leek's eyes, and the way his right arm was bent.

Brannigan was a good enough shot, but he had little stomach for a real square-on shooting fight.

Now he said sullenly, "I've got no fight with you, Leek. It's Gil Morgan I want to talk to."

"Then mebbe you'd better ride out to his place when yo're sober and have that talk!" Leek snapped.

"I done that," Brannigan grunted. "He weren't there, but I left a note."

"When?" Leek demanded.

"Yestiddy mornin'." Brannigan lifted his head and glared, and the truth of what he said was clear.

The information dropped like an avalanche into the silence of the room. For once, nobody doubted the man. Gil must have found the note. What it meant was that Gil had not actually

run out on a fight—but surer than pot, he had not stayed around long to breast it! For some time, the silence held.

Leek ripped out the longest curse of his life, and wheeled back to the bar. He said, "Ely, I am going to get rip-roaring drunk!"

"It usually is a pleasure," Ely said. "But it will be no pleasure tonight. Drink up!"

* * *

Dulcie took the talk lightly at first, but then the gossips got to work. There was the note to consider, something different than a few drunken words in a bar, and the fact that it had to be Leek who shut Brannigan up. She tried to hide her feelings from Gil. But her thoughts were in the effort she made to be amusing all the time, and the things she found to do that would keep them apart.

The following week he said, flat out, "Dulcie, you are not siding me in this."

She paused in crossing the floor. For an instant she hung her head and remained absolutely motionless. Then she turned and there was a question in her eyes. She said, "Whatever you think right is right with me, Gil. It is just that I cannot understand. You could spill Brannigan all over this country. You have handled tougher men in the past."

He said sullenly, "It is the past I am trying to forget."

"But you broke with Leek over this. And next to Cole, he was your best friend!"

"I will not live my life according to

another man's lights!" he rasped out. She said slowly, "No. But it is not just one man, or a few men, Gil. It is the county."

That icy barrier of his came across him like a shield. It shut her out. Within it were his thoughts and feelings. Through it he would not permit her to pass. He said, "If you are with the county, then I will ride."

She gave an impulsive gesture of her hand and ran toward him. "Gill!" she cried. "You have broken with everybody over this. Don't let it come between you and me!"

"You are the one who is doing it," he said.

"I am still wearing your ring."

He gave a grim smile. "I had hoped to see you wear it all your life. But you cannot just give part of yourself to a man. At least, not to me. You are all with me, or else there is nothing that binds us. That is harsh, but that is the way it has to be."

She plucked at his shirt. "I love you," she murmured. "You know it."

"That is not enough," he grated. "You have doubts. And folks like Lacey and Morgans cannot have doubts between them and survive." He gave her a long look through that wall of ice. "Do you know what people are saying—the worst?"

She hesitated, and then she looked up candidly into his face. "Yes, that something happened and you've gone yellow."

"Do you believe it?" he asked flatly. She tried to hold his gaze and could not. She dropped her head against his chest. She said slowly, "No, but I

cannot understand. This has gotten bigger than just a brawl. And a woman wants people to think well of her man."

He moved away from her and stood in the door against the soft evening light. He rolled a cigarette, and drew deeply of the smoke. He said, after a space. "I am not going to be put into a fight with Brannigan or any other bully. That is flat. After this, there will be others. You can look ahead and see what that means, and the worst you can think will not come up to the truth."

She was hurt and distraught and a storm of perplexity tore through her. She told him, "You are not making it very easy, Gil!"

"It is not easy," he answered, without turning. "It might be that for five years you would be ashamed to show yore face in town."

She moved to the piano on which was the daguerreotype of Cole. His picture brought up memories of hoofs pounding through the night, and flashing guns, and that wild, chilling call of the trails when victory had been won. Out of her misery and hurt suddenly welled a wave of bitter anger.

She said, "You were not afraid to fight when Cole was alive. Was it Cole you counted on?"

He turned in the door and looked across at her. His eyes were narrow and bleak. "Is that what you think?" he asked with deadly quiet.

"What else am I to think?" she cried. "What would Cole think?"

"Mebbe," he said thinly, "he would think you had better give me back my ring."

Her head flung back with pride. "Why, he likely would," she flared. Taking the ring from her finger, she flung it to him.

He caught it and looked at it with a savage, mirthless smile. He said, "Some girl in some honky-tonk will be well paid. So long!"

He gave her one blasting look, filled with as much anger as her own. Then he pivoted on his heel and was gone. She stood frozen, not understanding how all this had come about. Suddenly she made a stricken gesture and ran to the porch, crying out his name. But he was already galloping with flying quirt across the ford.

HE WAS filled with bitterness, and violence moved through his blood like a storm. Hurt beyond measure, he thought, Cole would release me from that promise now. But I will keep it as long as I am in his country, and before I leave I will give the yips one last show!

It was sheer anger and wrecked pride that made him do it. But now he stopped in town and went into the Desert Bar. His appearance brought a dead silence upon the room. Ely was there and so was Leek. Both looked at him; their faces hardened and both looked away.

Brannigan was there too. He taunted now, "Why, if it ain't that great fighter, Gil Morgan! Morgan, by the looks of things I ain't going to have the privilege of tangling up with you!"

"You are not," Gil answered on a dead, emotionless note. "Not with fists or guns or ropes or any other way."

Brannigan, I don't aim to take up yore offer."

There was a sudden hubbub of talk and swearing and contempt.

But this hell of self-torture was not enough to appease the black things moving through the violence of his nature. There was one thing more he had to do, and now he did it. He fished Dulcie's ring from his vest pocket, and stood there, turning it in front of him. He would not have them think that she had been walked out on.

This was the way he was standing when the doors burst open and the Hanlon gang came in with drawn guns.

Slash Hanlon let out a short, high yip, and then all humor was blotted from his face. He looked cold and merciless and more cruel than the devil. He snapped, "This is a holdup, gents, and I don't need to tell any of you that what the Hanlons say they mean! Back against the walls and throw down yore guns!"

His eyes had caught the gleam of Dulcie's diamonds as the men obeyed.

But he turned first to Brannigan, and Brannigan's face was the color of raw lead. Hanlon said, "Why, Brannigan, yo're a hell of a color for a long rider! What's ailin' you? Would it be remembering that you cheated us out of fifty head on that rustled L-Gate stock?"

The L-Gate was the Lacey brand. Suddenly the pall of hurt and humiliation rolled off Gil. His eyes came alive with deadly lights. Here was a reason to take a fight! But it was too late for him. With a single shot, Hanlon dropped Brannigan in his tracks.

But something else happened as Hanlon turned. Gil saw that there was a fresh S-scar upon the left side of his face. Seeing that, all of the suppressed violence and vengeance in him came up like a blaze. Carefully, he moved a pace from the bar and stopped.

Hanlon turned back and stared at him, demanding, "What's keeping yuh rooted, brother—waitin' to give me that ring?"

"You and me have got a little private business first," Gil told him flatly. "Unless yo're scared to take on a private fight when you've got yore gang and two guns drawn!"

"Slash Hanlon's scared of nothing!" the outlaw barked. An instant before, he would have shot Gil like a dog. But now his reputation was at stake. Cold fury was in his eyes. "What beef have I got with you, Gil Morgan?"

"You killed Cole Lacey over to Keystone," Morgan said. "But you'd never a-killed him if I'd been there to handle yore extra hand. And I figure I got a draw agin you comin'."

The wild pride in Hanlon sparked up in his eyes. He gave a great blast of breath. He boomed, "Why, if you want to die the same way, that is good enough with me! Morgan, I'm goin' to holster and give you a break. But I am not takin' my hand off my gun!"

Gil nodded, and at the same moment threw himself; in that instant he felt Hanlon's slug tear in to his left side. But his throw had him rolling on the floor, and his own gun was out. His first shot matched Hanlon's second. That second shot caught his left shoulder and knocked him half around. But,

kicking back, what he saw was Hanlon sagging at the knees, with his gun hanging useless by the guard, and a look of utter disbelief upon his tough, scarred face.

But there were other Hanlons, and this town was a rich haul. Now a slug from another Hanlon gun smashed splinters into Gil Morgan's face. He rolled, and, catching Leek's suddenly hilarious expression, grinned and jerked his head. Leek's tough body went hurtling by and skidded upon the floor, and then Leek had his own gun in hand and the two of them were blazing at the Hanlons. The bartender suddenly brought his sawed-off shotgun out from under the bar, and Ely produced a wicked derringer. There were others. In two minutes of wild and roaring fighting, the last of the Hanlon gang were racing for the door.

THEY STRETCHED Gil out and tripped away his shirt. Leek said with admiration, "Eight slugs in you, pardner! Yo're doing fine. I reckon this whole county owes you an apology."

He winked as he started to pour whiskey into the wounds and dropped closer to Gil's ear. "And I reckon a certain lady will be takin' back that ring!"

Gil winced at mention of the ring and turned away his head. The slugs didn't matter very much, or whether he was really hurt or not. But that ring in his pocket would never go back upon Dulcie's finger. That distrust of hers was something that would live between them all their life. It would mean that

she had come to him after the county was ready to make amends.

He said, "Leek, I want you should patch me up so I can ride on out. And afterward, you ride out and tell her how things were. Tell her the ring won't go into any honky-tonk. It will go into the river. She'll know then what it was all about."

"Hell!" Leek grunted with a grin in his voice. "You can't ride for weeks yet. And about the other, you jist lie there and tell her yoreself!"

Gil turned to find out what Leek meant, and looked up into Dulcie's face. Without her saying a word, he knew that she had ridden after him to make apology, and that it had been nothing but temper between them earlier in the day.

He smiled and gave a single nod, and watched her drop beside him in the sawdust. And then she had his head pillowed against her, and she was whispering in his ear, "You'll never believe me, now!"

"I will never doubt you again," he corrected gently. Then he scowled. "But what in hell are you doing in a bar?"

"This," she said, and careless of the crowd, dropped her warm lips to his.

Everything that a woman could ever tell a man in her whole life was in that kiss. But there was one thing special, and this was the thing that struck down into his amazement; that she had come after him to tell him she did not care whether he had turned yellow or not, that even if he had turned yellow, she would ride beside him along whatever trail he chose.

He had one last silver dollar—and one last chance to ride out of town alive!

BOOM TOWN

by William Heuman

IT WAS late afternoon when the Overland Stage rumbled through the main street of the fabulous Crystal City. Brett Halliday counted the gambling establishments lining each side of the avenue and figured an even dozen before the coach rattled up to the station. But there had been twice that many saloons—and this was but one street of the city.

Streets of Silver. They used second an' third grade ore, mister, to pave the streets! That's Crystal City.

Brett Halliday had fingered the lone silver dollar in his pocket and reflected on that fact. A faro dealer in Frisco had cleaned him out at the Mountebank Club, and the game had been fair. Fortunately he'd purchased his stage ticket to Crystal City before going into the game.

He stepped out of the coach, conscious of the knot of men standing on

the walk, watching him. The driver came around to the rear boot to take out his bag.

He said under his breath, "Didn't know you was that important, mister, to bring Big Jim Kirby down to the depot."

Brett looked up quickly. A big gray-haired man with a pair of twinkling blue eyes, smooth-shaven face and solid bulldog jaw, was striding toward him. Brett waited curiously. Big Jim Kirby was the first big time silver operator in Crystal City, owner of the stupendously rich Lucky Star mine. Kirby was coming forward, hand outstretched, as Brett slapped the dust from his black frock coat.

"Mr. Harris—" Kirby began, but never finished the sentence. The fire bell started to clang up the street, ringing against the constant pounding of the stamp mills. A rider shot down the

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center of the road, yelling at the top of his voice, and Brett saw Jim Kirby's jaw grow slack, the gleam leave the big man's eyes, as he spun around, leaped into the saddle of a gray horse standing a few yards away, and raced up the street.

The stage driver, a tobacco-chewing oldster with a drooping gray mustache and one squint eye, muttered, "Damn"—his angry voice fading into the noisy confusion of the street. In the maelstrom of sound Brett caught the words, "Lucky Star," and an ominous undercurrent that told of trouble of long standing.

Brett Halliday watched the crowds pour out of the saloons and rush after Jim Kirby. Then he took his bag from the driver and stepped onto the boardwalk outside the station office. The station master came out, green eyeshade stuck on his head. He looked at Brett and nodded, then stood with his hands on his hips, staring up the avenue.

"Excitement," Brett murmured. "Reckon there's more to it than just the fire!"

The station master laughed. He looked at the tall man before him, taking in the gambler's cool dark eyes, the smooth angle of the jaw, the straight line of the mouth.

"When you're around here twenty-four hours, mister," he chuckled, "you'll know."

"Any reason," Brett murmured, "why I should wait that long?"

The station master shrugged thin shoulders.

"The 'Ring' is trying to drive Big

Jim off the lode. The Lucky Star is supposed to have petered out, but Jim Kirby still has faith in it; they're going down another level."

"The Lucky Star petered out?" Brett asked slowly. "Stock was selling high last week in 'Frisco."

"It's teetering now. When it breaks, Jim Kirby goes back over the pass the way he came in—on foot, leading a mule!"

Brett Halliday set his bag inside the door and started up the street after the crowd.

There were a thousand people around the shaft of the Lucky Star when Brett arrived, and more coming up all the time. Platoons of redshirts fought their way through the crowd toward the column of black smoke pouring up into the air.

Brett heard the screams and sobs of women whose miner husbands had been trapped down below. A bevy of girls from a nearby gambling house brushed past the tall man, and he grinned. One of them stopped. She had very little makeup on in comparison with the others. Her hair was dark—almost blue-black, with a pair of sparkling black eyes to match.

"Hello, Faye," Brett murmured. "Thought I'd run across you here."

Faye Chandler smiled and nodded, "All roads lead to Crystal City, Brett," she said quietly, "for our kind."

In the push they were jostled against each other and Brett put an arm around the girl. "How long have you been here?"

"I came over the pass three months ago." Faye Chandler said quietly. "I'm

working in Mel Drakar's Paramount House."

"The biggest?" Brett asked.

"The biggest," Faye said. "We cater to the silver operators, not the men who dig the ore. I don't like taking it from poor men."

"Who's Drakar?" Brett wanted to know.

"He belongs to the Ring," Faye said softly. "I wouldn't advise you to buck the Paramount House, Brett."

Brett Halliday fingered the silver dollar in his pocket. "The Ring start this fire in the Lucky Star?" Brett asked quietly and saw the humor in her eyes.

"You have big ears, Brett," she murmured. "I don't know anything about it. The Ring has no use for Jim Kirby and they're trying to buy out the Lucky Star."

"So they burn him out," Brett said, "and he can't bring up ore. His stock drops to nothing and he's chased off the lode. That it?"

"That's Crystal City," Faye Chandler acknowledged. "The big fish eat the small fish, and then a group of middle-sized fish gang up and eat the big fish."

"Drakar run the Ring?" Brett asked. They were working through the crowd, getting closer to the shaft.

FAYE CHANDLER'S eyes snapped. "Drakar's not so bad. He's straight at least, but the others I can't vouch for." She paused. "A man named Abel Carewe is the recognized head. He's a plunger from the Coast. Came in with a half dozen other silver operators

and they're trying to get control of—everything."

Brett Halliday shook his head. "I didn't hear of Carewe on the Coast," he ventured.

"You will in another two months," Faye snapped, "after he drives out Kirby. He'll have holdings worth a hundred million dollars; he'll be the richest man in the United States."

"But he's no good?" Brett asked softly.

"Rotten," the girl mumbled. "Already he's cut the wages of the miners from four dollars a day to three-fifty. He'll bring it down lower when he grabs the Lucky Star; he's getting control of the freighting companies and jacking up the price of transportation. Prices will go up and only Carewe and the Ring will be able to buy."

Word was being passed back excitedly from the people up in front close to the shaft. "Fire's on the five-hundred-foot level," a man yelled in Brett's ear. "They got a dozen men trapped on the seven. Nobody knows whether they're dead or alive!"

Brett watched the black smoke pouring out of the shaft. It would be almost impossible to send anyone down on the elevator to search for the men. "They're sendin' down the elevator," Brett's informant told him. "They'll leave it on the hundred-foot-level for a few minutes to give the men a chance to git on—if they kin."

A woman was wailing in the crowd and Brett felt Faye Chandler shiver at his side.

"What happen if nobody comes up on the elevator?" he asked quietly.

"Only way to stop that fire," the stranger told him, "is to seal up the mine till it goes out by itself. I'm bettin' ten to one Big Jim don't close the Lucky Star till he finds out."

Brett felt Faye Chandler's fingers gripping his arm. "He's going down!" she gasped. "Big Jim Kirby's going down!"

A roar went up from the crowd as Jim Kirby stripped off his shirt, revealing a powerful torso, tied the shirt around his face and stepped into the elevator. One of the firemen was remonstrating with him, but Kirby shook his head and grimly gave the order to lower.

Brett Halliday felt a thrill of admiration for this big man as he watched his head disappear in the smoke. The elevator was lowered at a terrific rate of speed in an attempt to get the silver operator past the five-hundred-foot level before he suffocated. The crowd settled back to wait, speaking in hushed tones. Brett saw the big, sandy-haired man pushing up to the front, contemptuously shoving aside the miners. He had a beak of a nose, pale blue eyes, cold as ice, a wide, strong mouth. It was the face of a predatory animal—void of all the instincts of humanity—yet revealing a powerful intellect in the tremendously high forehead.

Brett sensed who the man was even before Faye Chandler whispered, "Abel Carewe!"

A smaller man pushed behind Carewe. He was slim, dark-haired, white of face, with intense black eyes, a delicately carved nose and a straight line for a mouth. His lips were thin and blood-

less. He walked with his right shoulder slightly higher than the left, giving the impression that his head was cocked to the side like that of a bird listening.

"Mel Drakar behind Carewe," Faye Chandler said, "and Johnny Larro with Drakar—drunk as usual!"

Brett glanced at the fellow next to Drakar. He had the appearance of a cadaver—tall, thin-shouldered, purplish nose, dead-fish eyes, utterly no expression on his mottled face.

"Who's Larro?" Brett wanted to know.

"Drakar's gun hand," Faye said slowly. "He's supposed to do the gun work for the Ring."

"Pretty fast with a gun?"

"Larro's very bad when he's drunk," Faye murmured, "and he's always drunk!"

The crowd waited five minutes with no sign from Jim Kirby down in the shaft. Brett saw the firemen go into a conference. The decision they had to make was a tremendous one. Thirteen men were now down in the mine, probably dead, but possibly unconscious.

"They can't give up," Faye Chandler whispered.

Brett Halliday listened to the clack of the cables. The roof of the cage came into view, and a fireman ran forward.

They had the news in a few moments. Kirby wasn't in the car. It had come up empty!

BRETT HALLIDAY watched the face of Abel Carewe. The big sandy-haired man was standing a dozen yards away from him, black cigar stuck

between his teeth. There was no mistaking the glint of joy in the man's blue eyes, even though his face bore no expression. It was the look in Carewe's eyes which made Brett disengage Faye Chandler's arm and push forward through the crowd.

He touched one of the firemen on the arm and the man tried to shove him back.

"I'd like to go down," Brett said quietly, and as the fireman blinked, he pointed, "Down." He smiled. "Let me off at the seven-hundred-foot level."

A man in the crowd heard him talking and let out a yell. "It's Lane Harris!" he roared. "He wants to go down!"

Brett recognized him as one of the men who had been standing with Jim Kirby at the station, waiting for the chap named Harris.

Abel Carewe took the cigar from his lips, whispered something to Mel Drakar, and then went forward himself.

The firemen were surrounding Brett, all talking at once, as the gambler stripped off his black frock coat and white shirt. A man asked anxiously, "You know mines—will there be enough oxygen down below the five-hundred-foot level?"

"I'll find out," Brett grinned cheerfully. He felt a hand on his arm, and he turned around to look into the face of Abel Carewe. The big man leaned forward and whispered, "You're too valuable to the rest of us here to risk your life—ten thousand dollars if you don't go down, Harris."

Brett stared into the bleak eyes. He ripped Carewe's fingers from his arm. "There's not enough money in Crystal

City to keep me up here," he grated.

Carewe's expression changed; he spoke sharply. "You'll never come out of there, Harris."

Brett fished the single silver dollar from his pocket. He tossed it to one of the firemen.

"Cover that, 'Carewe," he smiled thinly. "I'll take even money I make it." Over Carewe's shoulder he caught a glimpse of Faye Chandler's white face; then another girl with honey-colored hair pushed up behind Faye, terror in her eyes. She was not a gambling house girl—her clothing indicated that. She had the face of a doll, blue eyes, delicately curved lips. Brett stared at her, surprised.

"Ready, Harris?" one of the firemen called.

He tied the shirt around his face and stepped into the cage, taking a deep breath before the smoke assailed him. He heard the noise outside as the cables started to clack again. Someone had shoved a miner's lantern into his hands, and a bunch of matches. The lantern was out, but he could light it if he reached the seven-hundred-foot level—if there was sufficient oxygen down there to keep it going.

Smoke billowed around him as he crouched on the floor of the cage and he held the shirt tight to his mouth, holding his breath as much as possible. In the pitch blackness the cage rattled violently as it dipped into the bowels of the earth.

The quick descent to a new air pressure level made his ears ring, it beat against his temples. The heat was beginning to blister his skin, drenched

now with perspiration. His eyes were beginning to pain and he had to close them tightly, as the water flowed down his cheeks. He knew he was losing consciousness. He had to fight it. This was the thing which had probably gotten Big Jim Kirby.

Choking, nauseated, he held his breath as the cage dropped through the darkness. A terrific blast of heat assailed him for a second and then was gone. He took a short, gasping breath—and knew he was past the five-hundred-foot level.

A short while later the cage stopped in the darkness. It was possible to breathe now, but not for any great length of time. Brett fumbled with the door of the cage and stumbled out, feeling for the rock floor. He reeled three steps in the darkness and then tumbled over a body. Striking the match he lit the lantern, but it flickered weakly, threatening to go out any moment.

Brett turned the body over and stared into the begrimed face of Jim Kirby. He held his hand to Kirby's heart and felt the slight beat. It was evident the big man had stumbled out of the cage in a coma and then lost consciousness entirely.

Lantern in hand, Brett Halliday walked down the tunnel, shouting at the top of his voice. The lantern burned more brightly as Brett proceeded another fifty yards, stumbling over a small steel track, and clambering over several cars of rough ore. Twice he passed air pipes and stopped to stick his head into the entrance, drinking in deep drafts of the fresh air

from the surface before continuing on.

He yelled again, and this time heard an answering shout. A group of haggard men burst around a bend in the tunnel and raced toward him. The fear of death was in their eyes.

"The cage here?" one of them yelled.

He grasped Brett's arm.

The gambler nodded. "It'll take up six at a time," he said quietly. "The rest will have to wait until it comes back."

"We were up by the shaft for a long time," one of the miners mumbled, "but we couldn't stand the heat and had to go back farther."

"The cage was sent down before," Brett told him. "They must have lowered it just as you went back."

Back at the cage he gave them the instructions, after carrying Jim Kirby to the floor of the lift.

"The fire's on the five-hundred-foot level," he warned. "Take a deep breath before you hit it, and hold your breath as long as you can after you pass the entrance."

He yanked on the rope and the cage started to ascend.

It came down again minutes later and Brett herded the remaining miners through the door. Ascending was not nearly as bad as descending. They knew the location of the five-hundred-foot level, and were able to take a deep breath before they passed it.

Choking and blind with tears, they stumbled out of the cage at the surface. Two of the firemen grabbed Brett and led him away toward a waiting coach. Jim Kirby was sitting in the coach, still stripped to the waist, but with a

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large blanket thrown around his shoulders.

Chapter II

DAMNATION

THE GIRL with the honey-colored hair and the bright blue eyes was sitting beside Jim Kirby. She held out her hand and helped Brett into the coach.

Eyes still blinded with tears, Brett could scarcely see anything, but he felt the pressure of her fingers. The coach driven by two beautiful black stallions was led through the crowd. Brett Halliday heard the cheers, saw men reaching forward to grip his hand.

"How do you feel, Harris?" Kirby asked anxiously. "We're taking you back to my hotel."

Brett leaned back against the leather cushions. He glanced at the girl.

"My niece, Loretta." Jim Kirby grinned. "She wants to thank you for saving the life of her precious uncle."

"We've heard so much about you, Mr. Harris," Loretta Kirby bubbled. "Uncle Jim promised to bring you out to the villa as soon as you find the new silver vein."

Brett opened his mouth to correct the error when Jim Kirby broke in. "Mr. Harris won't find a silver vein," he chuckled. "We've hired him to handle some of our engineering problems in the Lucky Star, so we can go down a few hundred more feet."

Again Brett was about to speak when the carriage rolled to a stop outside the hotel and Jim Kirby sprang out to

help him down. The gambler shrugged as the silver operator hustled him up the carpeted stairs into a luxurious apartment.

"You'll need a warm bath, Harris," Kirby told him. "I'll have a dinner brought up."

Brett thought of the lone silver dollar he'd had in his pocket when he arrived in Crystal City. He hadn't expected a warm bath and a luxurious dinner. Jim Kirby boomed his orders at the hotel help and Brett decided against immediate protest.

Kirby had a new suit of clothes ready for him when he'd washed up, his own coat and shirt having disappeared at the Lucky Star mine. Dinner was brought in.

"My niece will see you later in the evening," the big silver man said. "But first I want to thank you for my life, and the lives of a dozen of my miners. It seems you arrived in the nick of time, Mr. Harris—"

"The name," Brett stated calmly as he lit the big cigar, "is Halliday. Brett Halliday."

Jim Kirby nearly dropped the fork from his hand. He choked on a piece of steak; then caught his breath.

"Say that again, friend."

"I'm Brett Halliday." The gambler grinned. "I've been trying to tell you a number of times."

"You're not Lance Harris? The mining engineer I hired?"

"Do I look like him?" Brett countered.

Kirby gulped and shook his head. "I wouldn't know," he said weakly. "Nobody around here would know. Harris

is supposed to be the best mining engineer in America. He's been in Peru for the past few years."

"You were waiting at the coach station for him," Brett observed. "Was he due on that stage?"

Kirby nodded. Already, Brett could see his mind was working rapidly, trying to figure something out of the situation.

"The stage had another passenger," Brett explained. "He had to get off at Big Springs, other side of the Sierras. Seemed to be pretty sick." He paused. "I heard the doctor say he might have to stay in bed a few weeks."

"A few weeks?" Jim Kirby murmured. "In a few weeks I can be a pauper!" He watched Brett intently, trying to read his mind. "This whole town thinks you're Lance Harris," he said finally.

Brett shrugged. "They should have asked."

"What's your business?" Kirby wanted to know. "Are you interested in mining?"

"Not digging it," Brett chuckled. "I play two games—faro and stud poker."

Jim Kirby lifted his eyes. "Professional gambler!" he whispered. "You could do it—with a poker face."

"Do what?"

Kirby leaned forward over the table. "The Lucky Star has been producing three million dollars worth of high grade silver the past five years," he said quietly. "Recently, we've struck a snag and the rumor has gone around that the Star has petered out. I don't believe that. I believe a few hundred more and we'll strike another vein—a bonanza."

Brett Halliday puffed on his cigar, making small blue rings with the smoke. "So you hired Harris to help you go down?" Brett asked.

Kirby nodded. "That's it partly. Harris made his reputation by cleaning out—drying up—the big Conway Mine in Bolivia. We're striking the same conditions on this lode. The farther down we go the more water we hit—hot water, gushing out of pockets. It's impossible to mine under those conditions." Jim Kirby paused. "Harris is supposed to have perfected some rather original engineering schemes for draining the water and timbering these lower levels."

"What's the other reason?" Brett asked.

Kirby smiled. "The stockholders will know that we have Lance Harris working with us. Harris is the one man who can keep the stock up—by his name alone. We can probably get along without him and reach the next big silver vein if we're given time. I'm willing to gamble on the next few weeks."

"And Harris may be sick for a few weeks," Brett stated.

"You're Harris in this town." Jim Kirby smiled. "That's good enough for me."

Brett Halliday looked at his cigar, studying it critically. "For how much?" he asked softly. "I have an idea the Ring won't be liking me!"

"Ten thousand," Jim Kirby came back like a flash. "Five now, and five more when the real Lance Harris turns up."

"What am I supposed to do?" Brett wanted to know.

"Just play the part of Harris," Kirby explained, "to everybody, including my chaming niece. Go down into the mine a few times and look around. I'll be with you, and I'll tip off my chief superintendent."

"I thought there was a fire in the Lucky Star," Brett said.

Kirby waved a hand. "Only one level was burning," he stated. "We'll seal it up for a few days and it'll go out by itself." He paused. "Is it a deal, Halliday?"

"The name," Brett murmured, "is Harris."

HE MET Loretta Kirby again after dinner and she was bubbling over with excitement. "The reporters from the *Clarion* are downstairs to see you, Mr. Harris"—she spoke rapidly—"but first you must tell me all about the rescue. I want to be the first to hear of it."

Brett told her in a few sentences and then made his excuses. He dodged the reporters by leaving at the rear exit, then stopped at the first gun shop and looked over an assortment of revolvers, ranging from gigantic Navy Colts to small black derringers which could be hidden in the palm of the hand.

He selected a .38 Colt with an arm-pit holster, walked to the back room of the shop and slipped it on. The Colt had a short barrel, and the weapon was scarcely distinguishable beneath the expensive frock coat Jim Kirby had loaned him.

It was nearly ten o'clock in the evening when he arrived at the Paramount House, whose two floors were lit up like

a Christmas tree, with music and laughter spilling out across the sidewalk.

The lower floor was partly a dance hall, with a luxurious eighty-foot mahogany bar ranging along one side, backed by gleaming mirrors in which a dozen sweating bartenders were reflected.

Through the haze of tobacco smoke Brett saw the crowd at the bar, and the dancers on the floor. Music was provided by a four-piece orchestra in a pit to the right. At the far end of the hall was an expensive maroon-carpeted stairway leading to the second floor—to the gambling rooms, Brett surmised.

The layout of the Paramount House was equal to anything he'd seen in San Francisco, and every item in the place from beer glasses to staircase had been freighted over the pass by the indefatigable bullwhackers.

As he stood to the side of the door, a man walked past him—stiffly, head held erect, tall and thin as a fence railing. His nose was purplish in color, and his eyes vacant with drink. He walked with the stolid determination of a man who is very drunk and yet resolved not to show it. Brett recognized the redoubtable Johnny Larro, dealer in death at the Paramount House.

Larro lurched slightly as he passed Brett Halliday, taking notice of him for the first time. Brett felt the man's dead eyes drift over him, recognition coming into them for a brief second. Then he went on.

As he walked toward the bar, Faye Chandler hastened down the staircase at the other end, moved in between the

dancers and approached him hurriedly. Brett stopped to wait for her. Glancing around, he noticed that Larro had stopped also and was watching, hands stiff at his side, swaying slightly, expression coming into his face for the first time. Larro's eyes were on the girl as she came up to Brett's side.

"Talk, Brett?" Faye whispered.

The gambler nodded. He walked toward an empty spot along the bar. A man grabbed him by the arm and pumped his hand enthusiastically.

"Bravest thing I ever saw in my life, Harris," he yelled. "This town will be running you for senator next year."

Brett nodded and smiled. "You'll excuse me," he said. Other men had turned and were watching him. He caught a glimpse of Abel Carewe talking with Mel Drakar far away at the other end of the bar.

"So you're still Harris," Faye said quietly, when they were alone.

"It pays well," the gambler murmured.

"They'll bury you with your pay," the girl whispered. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I have an idea," Brett said. He wagged his finger for a drink.

"How long have you been Lance Harris?" Faye wanted to know.

Brett poured two drinks and pushed one of them toward the girl, forgetting for the moment that she never touched the stuff. It was this fact, and others, which had attracted him to her two years back when he'd first met her in Silver City. This, and that air of assurance which she always carried with

her. It was a paradox that she should have been working in a gambling house, but she had been then—and was now.

"Harris and I have been synonymous for the past three hours," Brett grinned. "It was a case of mistaken identity." He told her of the real Harris who had been taken from the stage, very ill.

"Why do you keep it up?" Faye wanted to know. "You realize, of course, that the Ring has to stop Jim Kirby, and they can only stop him through Harris."

"It was a mistake at first," Brett smiled. "Now I'm working for Big Jim." He saw the understanding come into her eyes.

"You're holding up his head till the real Harris gets here," she murmured.

"For a consideration," Harris said. "I came into Crystal City flat broke."

"You could have asked me," Faye told him reproachfully.

Brett Halliday shook his head. He turned his back to the bar as he spoke, letting his eyes drift over the room. Johnny Larro was still standing in the same position, watching them intently, nostrils twitching slightly.

"You should never have come into Paramount House," Faye Chandler was saying quietly. "This is the headquarters of the Ring, Brett."

The gambler looked down at her and moistened his lips. "You know I always buck the biggest game in town," he said. His eyes were lifted toward the ceiling. "Upstairs, Faye?" he asked.

Faye Chandler nodded. "The gaming rooms are on the second floor, Brett," she stated. "Drakar usually starts his

own private poker game about this time. It runs till morning and there are no pikers in it."

"What do you do here?" Brett wanted to know.

"Drakar hired me as a general hostess," Faye explained. "I sing now and then."

"What about Larro?" Brett asked.

"The fool is in love with me," Faye snapped. "He follows me around like a dog." She paused. "He shot a Mexican last week because he thought the man was paying too much attention to me."

Brett grinned. "I'll steer clear."

"Abel Carewe is the man you'll have to watch," Faye said. "Even Larro takes his orders from Carewe."

"Who does Carewe take his orders from?" Brett asked softly.

"He gives them," Faye snapped, "to everybody except Big Jim Kirby."

"And you?"

He saw the girl's lips tighten and he had his answer.

Brett saw Johnny Larro move past them. Larro's eyes weren't dead now; they were alive with hatred, glittering like a rattlesnake's.

"Careful, Brett," Faye whispered as he set his glass down and paid for the drink. He grinned at her and moved carefully away along the bar.

Carewe waited for him, thumbs jammed in his vest pockets, a heavy gold chain crossing his stomach. Mel Drakar was smoking a cigarette, head perched on the side, face pale as usual.

"What's your game, Harris?" Drakar asked softly.

"Stud," Brett murmured. He looked

at Carewe calmly. "I didn't ask before," he said smoothly. "Did you cover my dollar this afternoon?"

Carewe fished a silver dollar from his pocket and flipped it into the air. It fell at Brett Halliday's feet with a clank.

"You were lucky," Abel Carewe smiled thinly. "I hope your luck holds out while you're in Crystal City."

"I think it will," Brett told him. A waiter, passing by, stooped to pick up the dollar. He handed it to the gambler. "Bring Mr. Carewe a drink," Brett announced. "My compliments."

"I'm careful who buys me drinks," Carewe stated.

Mel Drakar threw away his cigarette and stepped forward. "We are starting a little game of stud upstairs," he invited. "Care to join us, Harris?"

Brett Halliday nodded. He followed Drakar up the stairs, leaving Carewe still at the bar. Drakar pointed to a door in the wall just beyond the roulette table.

"We have a private room for our poker games," he smiled. "I've invited a few of the boys."

Brett blinked at the crowd on the second floor. There were two faro dealers working, along with the roulette man. A half dozen card games were going on at the tables along the wall. The monotonous voice of the roulette man drifted toward them.

"Make your play, gentlemen—make your play."

A keno dealer was calling numbers from behind another closed door, his voice, sharp, staccato in quality.

"This way," Drakar murmured.

BRETT FOLLOWED him through a maroon-draped doorway. The room was very small, scarcely large enough to hold the table and five chairs. Through the tobacco smoke Brett saw three men seated, cards in hand. They looked up when Drakar came in. The pot in the center of the table was very small and it was apparent they had been passing the time waiting for Drakar to start his game.

"Mr. Harris," Drakar introduced them. "Ed Ferguson, superintendent of the Howling Success mine. Sam Adams, editor of the *Clarion*; Jackson Dale of San Francisco."

Brett nodded to the three men impersonally. He had half-expected Drakar to ring in a number of professional gamblers, but Faye Chandler had stated that Drakar played fair.

"Quite a stunt you pulled off this afternoon," Ferguson grinned. "I wouldn't have gone down there for a million." He was a red-haired Scotchman with a mustache and mild blue eyes. Adams was small and pudgy with the hands of a child; his head was bald. Dale, the 'Frisco man, was evidently a silver operator with plenty to throw around. He sported a black beard and was dressed in the finest the Coast could afford.

A waiter came in with three packs of cards and set them on the table. Drakar pushed the cards toward Brett and then poured himself a drink.

Brett broke the seal and slid the shiny pasteboards from the packet. His experienced fingers slid over the backs and along the edges, feeling for markings. They were clean. He thought

he saw Drakar's eyes flicker as the gambling house proprietor downed his drink.

"Do much card playing in South America?" Drakar asked.

"Some," Brett said briefly. Adams, the editor, won the first pot, a small one, with three queens. Brett drew nothing and dropped out.

Dale took in about two hundred dollars on the next hand and then Drakar's deal came around. Brett watched the gambler's long white fingers as he shuffled the deck. Drakar handed him a pair of eights. Brett stayed in and drew another eight of clubs. He dropped a white chip to the table.

Adams stayed in; Drakar also, while Dale and Ferguson dropped out. With eight hundred dollars on the table Drakar revealed his hand. He held two pair—jacks and deuces. Adams had three fives.

Brett raked in the pot, the highest of the evening. But he knew the game was just getting warm, that before morning his five thousand might be a drop in the bucket.

By midnight Brett had dropped about a thousand. He was playing coolly, not plunging, but waiting for the cards. The game was level all the way through.

At one o'clock Adams got up, sweat forming little drops on his forehead. "I'm cleaned for tonight, gentlemen," he said huskily, and walked stiffly from the room.

By two o'clock Brett had won back his thousand, and was in another two thousand, after taking a large pot with a straight. Ferguson made his excuses and left the room.

Brett glanced at the two men in front of him, noting the coldness in Dale's dark eyes, and the set of his jaw behind the beard. Dale would stay in till morning, and the game would be getting hotter all the time. Drakar had stayed about even, while Dale and Brett Halliday were in the black.

Filling another straight a half hour later, Brett raked in a four-thousand-dollar pot. Mel Drakar was smiling at him through the haze of smoke.

"If you're as good an engineer as you are a poker player, Mr. Harris," the gambler murmured, "I'm thinking Jim Kirby has made a find."

Brett nodded his acknowledgment. The door opened behind him and a man came in, sliding into one of the vacant seats. It was Abel Carewe, black cigar in his mouth.

"What's the limit?" he growled.

Dale, the 'Frisco man, looked at him steadily. "The sky," he said.

Carewe laughed. "Can everybody here go that high?"

Brett Halliday fingered his pile of chips. "We'll go as high as we can," he murmured.

Carewe threw away his first hand contemptuously. On the second deal, he plunged heavily, losing the pot to Dale after showing two pair to the 'Frisco man's full house.

Brett watched the big man carefully. Carewe was a plunger, and sometimes the plungers were the hardest to beat if they drew fairly decent cards.

Carewe took a big pot five minutes later, and then started to win steadily. Brett watched Drakar's fingers as he dealt, and again saw the cynical smile

on the gambler's thin face. Constantly they broke open new decks of cards so it was utterly impossible to mark them in any way. Drakar was using no tricks, but still Carewe continued to win, betting recklessly on mediocre hands and taking them.

Brett watched his neat pile of chips go down. Dale started to lose also, while Mel Drakar was holding his own. Only Abel Carewe profited.

AT FOUR o'clock in the morning Brett had a thousand dollars in chips left out of the five thousand with which he'd started. Through the small window behind Drakar's back he saw the sky turning a light gray, and then pink. The noises had stopped in the big room beyond the door as the faro and roulette games ceased.

At five o'clock Brett shoved his last chip into the pot. He held four cards of one color, and in rotation; the six of clubs needed to fill the straight flush.

"One," he told Dale who was dealing. Carewe had drawn three cards.

Dale slid a pasteboard across the table and Brett Halliday looked at it steadily for a moment. He picked it up, no expression on his face. It was the six of clubs.

Calmly he slid the five cards together in the palm of his hand and laid them flat on the table. Carewe had been watching him intently as he picked his own three cards from the table.

Brett saw the big silver man's left eye twitch. Carewe had had a pair to begin with, and he'd apparently drawn another card of kind. Drakar and Dale were out.

Carewe shoved five hundred dollars into the pot and grinned triumphantly at Brett.

"You fill that flush, Harris?" he asked.

Brett shrugged. He looked at Drakar. "I have five thousand coming to me. Is it good here?"

Drakar nodded. "Make out a note," he said.

Brett scribbled the i. o. u. and Drakar called for five thousand more in chips. Brett covered Carewe's five hundred and went a thousand more. This was the last pot of the evening and he had to make it up.

Carewe went another thousand and Brett covered him, adding five hundred dollars in chips beyond Carewe's raise. Drakar was leaning back in his chair, hands in his vest pockets, head tilted to one side. Jackson Dale was lighting a cigar.

Carewe raised again, and then Brett pushed in the last chip out of the five thousand.

"That all?" Carewe asked.

"That's all," Brett told him regretfully.

Abel Carewe leaned forward over the table, hands clasped in front of him. He spoke to Dale without looking at him.

"Mind stepping outside a minute, mister?"

Dale blew out a cloud of smoke and pushed back his chair. "I'm through anyway," he said grinning.

Brett heard the door close behind him as Dale left. Drakar hadn't made a move.

Carewe's eyes swept the pile of chips

in the center of the table. There were over ten thousand dollars in chips.

"A nice pile of money," Carewe said, "for an engineer."

"I've lost bigger pots," Brett said cheerfully. "Want to show your hand?"

Carewe shook his head. He went off on a new tack. "When Jim Kirby signed you to come down here, Harris," he said grimly, "you didn't know anything about conditions in Crystal City. That right?"

"That's right," Brett said.

"Kirby's walking on thin ice," Carewe murmured. "He's going through any day, and he knows it. I expect to have his Lucky Star mine within a week."

Brett shrugged. "Why tell me?" he asked softly. Mel Drakar was listening in, but saying nothing.

"It doesn't pay," Carewe said, "to be on the wrong side in this town. When Kirby goes out, you'll go with him." He paused. "If you're not working for Big Jim when the crash comes, I'll take you on at my own mines at double whatever figure Kirby gave you."

"You want me to break my contract with Kirby?" Brett Halliday smiled thinly.

Abel Carewe fished out his wallet and dropped ten thousand dollars in bills into the pot in the center of the table.

"As an added inducement," he murmured. "I'll throw up my hand in this pot. The ten thousand goes with it. I'll back you against any play Kirby may make after you quit him."

Brett leaned forward and pushed the paper bills away. His jaw was tight.

"Your hand isn't worth anything in this pot, Carewe," he stated flatly.

The big man's fists balled on the table. He looked at Drakar and then back to Brett Halliday.

"You turning me down, mister?" he asked carefully.

Mel Drakar spoke for the first time. "Why buck us, Harris?" he muttered. "You'll end up in the gutter."

"I saw Kirby go down the shaft of the Lucky Star mine this afternoon," Brett said quietly, "to bring up his miners. I reckon I'll stay with him."

Abel Carewe's eyes were bleak as he picked up his bills and stuffed them into the wallet again.

"Show your hand," he snapped.

Brett spread his cards out slowly—five pasteboards ranging from the five of clubs to the nine of the same color—all clubs.

Carewe threw his hand into the pile without revealing it. He stood up, knocking his chair to the floor, gripping the edges of the table with both hands.

Brett Halliday watched him. He settled both feet firmly on the floor, hands and arms on the table, palm down.

"I gave you a chance to come in with us," Carewe was saying. "You turned us down. I never ask a man twice."

"You won't have to ask me twice," Brett said. "The answer will be the same."

Abel Carewe whirled around and walked out the door.

Brett saw the set of the big man's shoulders and he grinned.

Mel Drakar said quietly, a tinge of regret in his voice, "You can cash in your chips now, Harris."

Brett Halliday laughed silently,

catching the double meaning in Drakar's words. "I've been in tough towns before," he observed. "Nobody's running me out. Nor," he added thinly, "planting me." He swept the chips into the flat-crowned sombrero Jim Kirby had given him.

Going down the staircase, Brett saw Faye Chandler standing by the empty bar. Two swamper with buckets of water and mops were cleaning the floor. It was six o'clock in the morning and the Paramount House was empty.

Brett heard a man cough slightly and he saw Johnny Larro, back to the wall, standing stiffly, on the other side of the room.

Mel Drakar didn't speak until they were halfway down the stairs. He said then, "Ever find any pay dirt, Harris?" he asked softly, "where you struck porphyry in a shaft?"

Brett Halliday stiffened, but his face and eyes were expressionless. "Care to see my college diploma, Drakar?" he asked easily.

Drakar shrugged. "Never met a mining engineer who played a better game of poker," he said.

WATCHING HIM as he counted the chips at the bar, Brett saw the gleam in the little gambler's eyes. Drakar suspected something; he was a fox with a keen nose for the trail.

Faye Chandler was waiting for him a dozen paces away and he saw the relief in her eyes as he paused to speak with her. Mel Drakar glanced at them and then walked toward a door at the far end of the bar. Only Larro was left—Larro, and the two swamper.

"I was worried, Brett," Faye whispered.

The tall gambler grinned. "I broke their game," he murmured.

The girl shook her head. "It'll take more than a poker game to break Carewe's stranglehold on this town. Remember that, Brett."

Brett looked at her curiously. "What does it mean to you?" he asked finally.

She hesitated. "What made you go down that shaft this afternoon?" she asked. "You didn't know Kirby, and you didn't know the poor fellows who were trapped down there."

Brett Halliday watched the swamper out on the dance floor. "I saw Kirby go down," he ventured, "and I figured if he had the nerve—"

"That was all?" Faye persisted. "You didn't hear the wives and children of the men on the seven-hundred-foot level?"

Brett stared at her.

"I heard them," the girl was saying bitterly. "I've heard them cry before when Abel Carewe closed down the stamp mills and put them out of work; I've heard them cry when they didn't have any food for their children because Carewe cut their wages and they protested against it." She paused, and then went on vehemently, "I've been to their homes on the other side of town, Brett, and I know how they live."

"That where your money goes?" Brett Halliday asked slowly.

"I've helped many of them," Faye Chandler murmured, "but Carewe's too big for me. If I help a dozen, he brings misery to a thousand."

She was half sobbing now, and Johnny

Larro heard it across the room. Brett saw the gunman stiffen and then move toward them, swaying slightly as he walked. Faye saw him also.

"Get out," she told Brett quickly. "He watches me all the time. He'll kill you."

Larro was between Brett and the door now, still coming, his coat open. Brett saw the gunbelt, and the badge on Larro's right side. Johnny Larro was supposed to be lightning fast on the draw—and faster still when drunk.

"Johnny!" Faye Chandler screamed. "Don't."

Stupefied with drink, the gunman moved closer, walking with a peculiar stiff-legged stride. Brett Halliday reached him in three quick strides. His right palm smashed against Larro's cheek as the drunk's hand dipped for the gun.

The left palm hit the other cheek and then the right again. Whirling the man around, Brett rushed him back against the bar, pinned him there, and smashed both palms to Larro's face, slapping him into sobriety.

Dazed, with the tears streaming down his cheeks, Larro forgot about his gun and tried to protect himself with his hands. Brett brushed the gunman's hands away and continued to slap till Larro crumpled to the floor.

Rolling over on his side, Johnny Larro finally yanked the six-shooter clear from the holster.

"No!" Faye Chandler screamed.

Brett was reaching inside his coat for his own weapon when a thin, white-faced man leaped past him, knocking with his toe at Larro's right hand. The

Colt six-shooter leaped out of the gunman's hand and crashed to the floor a dozen yards away.

"Get up," Mel Drakar snarled. "Get up and get out, you fool!"

Larro got to his hands and knees, and then laboriously stood upright. He looked at Drakar, and then turned to Brett Halliday, the hatred gleaming in his bloodshot eyes.

As Larro shuffled out the front door they heard a movement from the other end of the empty dance hall. Abel Carewe was standing in a doorway, watching the group, his eyes on Mel Drakar.

Brett nodded to him. It was impossible to ascertain whether Carewe had witnessed the entire affair.

"I'll be leaving," Brett murmured. "Thanks." He nodded to Drakar.

Mel Drakar didn't say anything. He was looking at Carewe.

"Maybe you made a mistake," Brett Halliday whispered as he walked past the gambling house proprietor.

"That could be," Drakar said morosely.

Chapter III

TWO SIDES TO A KILLIN'

BRETT SMILED at Faye Chandler and left. He slept till noon at the Emperor House hotel and then went up to Jim Kirby's apartment. Big Jim had been waiting for him.

"I sent a man back over the pass last night, riding fast horses," the silver operator stated. "He came back after seeing Lance Harris."

"How is Harris?" Brett wanted to know.

"Down with malaria," Jim Kirby muttered. "He picked up the germ in South America and it's hit him again. He won't be able to get here for a few weeks."

Brett nodded. "In the meantime you'll go ahead and look for that new silver vein?"

"We'll have to find it," Kirby growled. "It's there. I know the Lucky Star mine."

In company with Loretta Kirby and Big Jim, Brett went down to the mine the following afternoon. He rode in the luxurious Kirby carriage, and men stared after them in the streets. Passing the Paramount House, Mel Drakar and Johnny Larro watched him grimly. Faye Chandler came out of a dilapidated miner's hut, saw him, and looked away.

Brett lit a cigarette and watched her quietly. Loretta was talking as usual, pointing out the sights to the gambler.

"Uncle Jim intends to raise the wages of his miners as soon as we strike the new vein," Loretta said. "It must be horrible to live in those old shacks."

Brett didn't say anything. Mentally, he compared her with Faye Chandler. Loretta had been reared in a beautiful home by an uncle. She was the best dressed woman in Crystal City, if not the entire West. Faye Chandler had taken care of herself since she was fourteen, and most of the money she now earned, joshing the big time gamblers at the Paramount House, singing an occasional song, she used to help the unfortunates of the silver town.

He spent the day down in the shaft

with Big Jim, looking over the square mine, the drifts and winzes, peering into the air pipes. Two hundred sweating miners labored in the terrific heat, blasting away tons of rock in the search for the precious silver vein, fighting against time as the Lucky Star stock teetered on the San Francisco market.

"If we can hold it up a few more weeks," Jim Kirby said, "I think we'll be all right. Your coming to the mine, Halliday, has stopped a great many of the stockholders from selling, despite the efforts of the Ring to break the market."

At the Paramount House that night Faye was a little cold.

"She has beautiful hair, Brett," the singer murmured.

"I didn't notice," Brett grinned.

He dropped a few hundred at faro upstairs and then came down again, passing Johnny Larro on the stairway. Larro, strangely enough was sober.

"Stay away from that girl," the gunman muttered without stopping, and Brett sought out Faye Chandler immediately.

"Meet me outside," she said hurriedly. "Side door."

Brett saw Abel Carewe watching from the top of the stairs. He had a drink and then went out. Faye was standing in the shadows, a shawl around her shoulders.

"I got this out of Larro," she said quickly. "Carewe doesn't trust Johnny Larro alone. He's bringing in Ed Garvey to help Larro. Garvey gets here tomorrow night, and they intend to set you up in the gambling room."

"Garvey?" Brett murmured. "He'd known Ed Garvey in Carson City, in

Danville—big mining towns far to the south. Garvey was a hired killer with a long list of murders to his credit.

"Garvey knows me," Brett said simply.

"You'll have to get out of town," Faye Chandler said quickly.

Brett smiled. "If I leave now," he stated, "Jim Kirby is finished. Carewe will spread the story that Harris walked out. That's the way he's planning it."

"They'll kill you," Faye whispered. "You can't face two gunmen at one time."

"No," Brett agreed. "I'll have to think of something." He paused. "If I walk out, what happens to all the miners in Crystal City? What happens to the people you've been trying to help?"

"I don't know," the girl groaned. "But I don't want to see you shot down like a dog, Brett."

"I'll think of something," Brett Halliday said again. "You go back now." He gripped her hand for a moment and then released it. "I owe you very much, Faye," he murmured.

On the way back to the hotel that night he picked up a box of cartridges at the gun shop, and in the morning hired a horse and rode out to a desolate canyon five miles from Crystal City.

Dismounting, he set up a target six inches square at a distance of fifteen yards and then deliberately fired shots at it. He'd seen too many gunfights during the past ten years in which a fast draw had been neutralized by one accurate shot. The draw had always been highly exaggerated. The man who drew fast, of necessity had to shoot

very fast—without too much accuracy.

In Danville Brett had seen Garvey shoot down a befuddled miner, but it had taken him five shots to do it. The hired killer was tremendously fast getting his gun from the holster, and this speed had always overawed his opponents. It took a cool, calculating mind to send one slug through the shower Garvey directed at his enemies.

At one o'clock in the afternoon Brett rode back to town, the cartridge box empty, the .38 Colt hot to the touch. He went immediately to the hotel and locked the door.

Big Jim Kirby came in late that afternoon, a frown on his face, the worry in his eyes. "We have three shifts in the Lucky Star," the silver operator said quietly. "The work is going on night and day, Halliday, but it will take a little more time."

Brett nodded. "I'll be around," he murmured. "Keep digging."

Jim Kirby hesitated. "I'm beginning to realize now," he said, "just how dangerous your position is. The Ring won't stop at anything, and you're the man in their way."

"They're not pushing me out," Brett observed.

Kirby walked to the window and looked out. "I don't like to see a man killed because he was helping me," he said quietly. "You've given me enough extra time for the five thousand I paid you."

"I made a contract," Brett said. "It stands."

Big Jim nodded. "Any time you want to walk out of that contract, Halliday," he stated, "you can do so."

BOOM TOWN

"I like this town," Brett said, "I'm staying."

He waited at the hotel till nearly eleven o'clock that night. Then, after cleaning the Colt and inserting fresh cartridges, he went down the stairs and into the street.

A group of miners from the Lucky Star passed him on the way off the second shift of the day. He saw their pallid faces and he noticed the ramshackle homes into which they turned. Faye Chandler had taken it upon herself to help these people.

Through the glass window of the office of the Clarion, Brett caught a glimpse of the bald head of Sam Adams, editor. He crossed the street at the corner of the Wells-Fargo bank, slipped down an alley and came out at a dark corner directly opposite the Paramount House.

MEL DRAKAR'S luxurious gambling house was lit up top to bottom, with a string of saddle horses hitched to the rack outside, and a dozen coaches lined in the stalls to the right.

Brett lit a cigarette and listened to the music drifting through the open windows. He stood in the doorway of a vacant house, entirely in the shadows, his position commanding the front and the side entrances of the Paramount House.

Men drifted in and out of the doors, lounged on the wide porch, their cigars glowing in the semi-darkness. Brett could hear their voices; once a woman screamed with laughter from the gambling room on the second floor.

It was nearly an hour before Johnny Larro came out the front entrance and glanced up the street. The gunman swayed as he walked down the street toward the coach stables. Brett left his place of concealment. The men were standing on the porch, but they didn't see him as he slipped past quickly, walking behind Larro.

The drunken killer walked stiffly to the end of the building, glanced at the coaches and then turned around. Brett Halliday hit him with his right, squarely on the jaw, knocking him against the wall of the Paramount House.

Larro's right hand dropped for the gun and Brett hit him with the other hand. Larro's head thudded against the wood boards. His eyes went blank and he slid to the ground.

Brett glanced up and down the empty street, and then, stooping, lifted the gunman to his shoulders and carried him between the coaches. Larro was very thin and could not have weighed more than a hundred and forty pounds.

Brett slipped the six-shooter from Larro's holster after depositing the man in an empty carriage. He threw the gun over the roof of the shed, heard it land among the stones of an empty lot on the other side, and then walked back swiftly toward the side entrance of the Paramount House.

Faye Chandler saw him as he circled the dance floor and started up the staircase. He smiled at her, taking the steps two at a time, passing the wide-eyed Met Drakar halfway up.

Stepping into the big room, he unbuttoned his coat, his dark eyes roving

ing over the crowd. Carewe was at the roulette table, his back to the door. Another man stood with him—a small, dark-skinned man in black, wearing a black sombrero well down over his eyes.

Brett Halliday smiled coldly. He walked up to within ten paces of the two men and then stopped.

"Ed," he called softly. His voice wasn't loud, but it penetrated. The group at the roulette table turned around, Garvey with them. He stared at Brett curiously.

The gambler swung open his coat, revealing the six-shooter strapped now around his waist. A man muttered under his breath and hastily bolted for the door. The others followed. Only Garvey and Carewe were left at the table.

A hush fell over the big room as the other games stopped automatically. Brett heard the rustle of chairs. The faro dealer coughed and then strolled leisurely toward the other side of the room.

Behind the closed door, the keno man still called his numbers in the same monotonous voice. Then that, too, stopped.

"You in this, Carewe?" Brett asked quietly. "If not, get away."

"I don't have a gun," the big silver man growled.

Brett saw his eyes drift around the room, searching for Johnny Larro. Ed Garvey, who was dark-skinned and had a small slit of a mouth, watched Brett, doubt plainly showing in his slate-gray eyes. There was no pity in the eyes; they were windows through which Brett

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could see the man's soul. Garvey was a hired killer, and working for a man like Carewe, he was drawing big money for his job.

"Get away," Brett told Carewe. He waited till Carewe had grudgingly drifted toward the other wall. "I'm ready, Ed," he said softly.

Still Ed Garvey didn't get it. The little gunman had a pearl-handled Colt strapped to his side; his right hand hung close to it.

"I don't get it," Garvey smiled. "What—"

"I'm Harris," Brett told him. "Earn your pay, Ed."

The light came into Ed Garvey's eyes. He grinned with his mouth only.

"I'll be damned," he murmured, his right hand dropping toward the handle of the six-shooter. The hand moved with incredible speed, the blue barrel of the gun flashing into the air as Brett Halliday's finger touched the butt of his own weapon.

Garvey fired twice, his first shot going high, and the second cutting through Brett's coat without touching the skin.

Brett's first shot struck Garvey squarely in the chest, knocking him back against the roulette table. He spun around, clutching at the wound with his left hand. His head dropped down on his chest, and the black sombrero fell to the floor, revealing Garvey's jet-black hair, parted down the middle.

Brett held his second shot as Garvey bent forward from the waist, the gun slipping from limp fingers. Then, very slowly, he tumbled forward on his face.

Carewe came up, face tight. He

signaled to two of the waiters to carry Garvey's body into a side room. Before following them, he stopped and stared at Brett Halliday.

"I'm not forgetting this, Harris," he said tersely.

Brett slipped the six-shooter back into the holster. "You didn't carry a weapon tonight, Carewe," he said. "I hope the next time we meet you'll have one."

Turning on his heel, with his back squarely to the big silver operator, he walked toward the door. Mel Drakar was standing there, head perched to one side, his face expressionless, but reluctant admiration in his dark eyes.

"I wouldn't advise you to come back to this place, Harris," Drakar murmured.

"I'll be back," Brett told him, "if necessary."

The news spread through the town like wildfire after Brett had gone back to the hotel. At two-thirty in the morning Big Jim Kirby rapped on the door.

"I was down in the mine with the superintendent," Kirby said quietly. "Just heard the story when I came up."

Brett sat on the edge of the bed. He reached for a pair of slippers with his bare feet.

"What happened?" Kirby demanded.

"A man named Garvey was shot up," Brett said briefly. "At the Paramount House."

"You know him before?" Jim Kirby asked.

"Met him," Brett stated. "He didn't have much time to talk so we're still on top."

Kirby shook his head. "Carewe hired him to shoot you up, didn't he?"

"Could be," Brett smiled. "He missed."

JIM KIRBY took a deep breath. "I've sent my niece back to visit Lance Harris on the other side of the pass," he explained. "Under the circumstances I don't think I'll bring Harris here. It would be murder."

"You want me to stay on?" Brett asked quietly. "They might be a little more careful after this affair with Garvey."

Kirby stared at him curiously. "I don't think it's the money with you, Halliday," he said at last. "I gave you a chance to pull out, and you've earned your pay." He paused. "Why do you want to stay?"

"Maybe I don't like Carewe. Maybe there are other reasons." In the past there had been no other reason, but reasons which affected his own welfare. He had an inkling now of the thing Faye Chandler had in mind, and it was bigger than himself; it affected many people. It was now a fight between right and wrong, and wrong was in the high seat.

"I thought," Jim Kirby said, smiling, "that professional gamblers played the odds. You're bucking the biggest odds you ever saw in your life, Halliday. For all we know the Lucky Star mine has petered out, and risking your life to help me will have been in vain."

"I'll risk it," Brett said.

"Any day," Kirby went on, "Carewe is liable to discover this hoax. He'll never forgive a man for a thing like this; he'll have you tracked down if you go to the end of the earth."

"I won't be going that far," Brett Halliday observed, "if Carewe is looking for me."

Kirby hesitated, and his jaw tightened. "If the Lucky Star comes through," he murmured, "and I get on my feet, I'll never stop till Carewe and the Ring are driven from Crystal City."

"How?" Brett wanted to know.

"The Ring," Kirby told him, "has half this city on the verge of bankruptcy. With capital, I can make loans to the small mine operators; I can put the independent stamp mills back on their feet. We can all fight the Ring together."

"I'd like to be in on that," Brett Halliday said simply.

They heard the knock on the door and the hostler at the Paramount stable slipped a note through. Brett gave the man a dollar and then opened the slip of paper. It was a message from Faye Chandler.

"Wait," Brett murmured. "Read this." He passed the note over to Kirby. It was hastily scrawled, but legible. Before Ed Garvey had died he'd given a statement to Abel Carewe, swearing that Lance Harris was Brett Halliday, a professional gambler from the southern mine fields. Carewe had already shot the statement down to the Clarion and Sam Adams was putting his paper on sale in the morning!

Jim Kirby crumpled the note in his fist and let it drop to the floor.

"How bad is this?" Brett asked, watching the silver man.

"Bad," Kirby muttered hoarsely. "If Adams gets his paper out in the morning, the news will reach 'Frisco in two

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days. When it's learned that I used a trick like this to keep up Lucky Star stock, they'll know I'm almost on the rocks. There'll be a rush to sell, and Lucky Star will hit rock bottom in twenty-four hours." He paused and grinned coldly. "We'll be through in Crystal City."

"And you won't be able to work the mine?" Brett persisted.

"I'm drilling now on borrowed money," Kirby told him. "In two days my credit won't be worth a silver dollar."

Brett dressed rapidly. "Can we stop Adams?" he asked.

"We can try," Jim Kirby muttered.

"Though I think Carewe holds a big note on the *Clarion*, and Sam will be afraid to cross him."

They confronted Sam Adams ten minutes later across the counter of his shop. The little editor was wet with perspiration. He looked at Brett suspiciously.

"You get a note from Abel Carewe?" Kirby asked easily.

Adams nodded. He took off his spectacles and wiped them uneasily.

"We've been friends a long time, Sam," Kirby went on smoothly. "You know what that note means to me?"

"Is it true?" Adams asked.

Kirby nodded. "The real Harris took sick on the other side of the pass. I had to use Halliday as a substitute."

"I have to print this," Adams muttered. "Carewe has ten thousand dollars in this paper, Jim. He'll break me."

"Can't you hold it over till the next issue?" Brett put in.

"The *Clarion's* a weekly," Adams said.

"Abel Carewe would have my hide if I held this thing over till next week."

"How much time can you give us?"

Kirby asked grimly.

"I can hold up publication for maybe ten hours," Adams said slowly, "by having the press break down."

"Ten hours," Kirby smiled. "Ten hours in which to hit the biggest silver vein in history."

Sam Adams cleared his throat. "You could be wrong about the Lucky Star, Jim," he said quietly.

Jim Kirby laughed, and for the first time Brett Halliday noticed the pallor of the man's face.

"I know that hole in the ground," Big Jim murmured. "Every inch of it. I know how the rock runs, and there's more silver down there, Sam."

"I hope you're right," Adams mumbled. "You're playing a hunch, Jim, and all I can give you is the ten hours. I have a wife and family to support and I can't lose my newspaper on a gamble like this."

It was three o'clock in the morning when they went out on the street again, but Crystal City was still booming, most of the saloons wide open. Miners, coming off the night shifts, usually stopped in for a drink or a game of cards before going home.

Brett Halliday watched Big Jim Kirby swing down the street and fall in step with a half dozen miners moving toward the Lucky Star shaft. He saw the miners grin at the big boss.

Then, slowly, Brett turned and walked in the opposite direction, passing the Wells-Fargo bank, strolling leisurely toward the Paramount House.

He'd give Abel Carewe an invitation.

The porch of the Paramount House was empty as Brett put his foot on the first step. He was on the third step when the door burst open and Johnny Larro stood in the entrance, swaying slightly, his slim figure silhouetted in the glare of light from the dance hall. Brett Halliday heard the noises beyond Larro—the clink of glasses, the soft dance music.

The gunman's hands were stiff at his side, and then the right shot toward the butt of the six-shooter. Brett went for his own weapon thinking of Garvey, wondering if his luck would hold true.

He had the .38 out of the holster when Larro's gun roared, flame darting from the muzzle. Something struck Brett in the head. The Paramount House seemed to explode in front of him. There was a terrific ringing in his ears, and he felt himself falling. Colored lights were flashing in his eyes, but there was no pain. Death was sweeter than he had imagined.

HE WAS aware next of a terrible throbbing in the head, and voices. He felt a cool hand on his face and he grasped it suddenly.

Faye Chandler said, "Lie still, Brett."

He opened his eyes and the light blinded him for the moment. It was broad daylight, with the sun streaming through the window. He didn't recognize the room.

"What time is it?" he asked hoarsely.

Faye sat at his side, holding his shoulders so he couldn't get up. A man with a beard stood near the door, a pair of spectacles perched on his nose.

"Where am I?" Brett wanted to know.

"Johnny Larro shot you," Faye told him. "The bullet grazed your skull, knocking you unconscious. I had two men carry you up to my room."

"Larro think I'm dead?" Brett asked her grimly.

"It was an ugly wound." Faye explained. "They thought the bullet had gone through."

"What time is it?" Brett asked again.

"Eleven o'clock," Faye told him.

"You must sleep now, Brett."

He lay back on the pillow after noticing that his coat and gunbelt were hanging over a chair. The man with the beard left a few sleeping pills and then departed.

"I had Dr. Bell brought over," Faye said, "after I had you carried here."

"That means you're through at the Paramount House," Brett said quietly. "You're working with the wrong side, Faye."

The girl nodded. "I'm through anyway," she stated flatly. "I could work for Drakar, but Mel is in with Carewe much too deeply for his own good. I had to leave."

"What are you going to do?" Brett asked her.

She shook her head. "I haven't any plans as yet."

Brett Halliday nodded and closed his eyes. He heard her go out a few minutes later, and then he lay still for a full quarter of an hour. It was eleven-thirty in the morning when he sat up. The sudden movement nauseated him and he had to sit still for another five minutes before he was steady enough to get up and get dressed.

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Dr. Bell had placed a bandage around his head, the wound being just over the left ear. He placed his hat carefully over the bandage, strapped the gunbelt around his waist, and walked out slowly.

The little hotel at which Faye Chandler stayed was only a few doors down the street from the Paramount House. It was an hour and a quarter before one o'clock—the deadline—when he walked up the steps of the porch, coat wide open, white of face, his mouth a thin straight line.

Ferguson, the mine superintendent, was coming out of the door. He gulped and stepped to one side as Brett moved past him. The lower floor was nearly empty. Three men stood at the long bar; a card game was going on at a table off the dance floor.

Thumbs hooked in the gunbelt, Brett Halliday circled the dance floor, his eyes flitting over the big room. He didn't see Larro, but he heard Mel Drakar's voice upstairs, out of sight.

One of the bartenders spotted him and he dropped a glass of beer he had been handing over the counter. The glass struck the edge of the bar and broke on the floor.

A man coming down the stairs stopped suddenly. It was Abel Carewe. Brett saw the bulge on the big man's hip. Carewe was armed. He hadn't seen Brett as yet, standing to one side of the stairway, waiting for him.

"Carewe," Brett called softly.

The big man spun around, his face tight, his pale blue eyes staring down at the gambler.

"I came back," Brett said flatly.

"I see you," Abel Carewe retorted. "You hired two men to kill me," Brett told him. "Maybe you'd like to try it yourself now."

Carewe didn't say anything. He was grinning coldly, bracing himself on the stairway.

"Make your play," Brett invited. He stood with his hands at his sides, feet apart. His head started to swim and he hoped Carewe would act fast before he started to get dizzy.

Coolly, Abel Carewe went for his gun. He was not as fast as Ed Garvey had been, or Johnny Larro, but he wasted no time, and Brett Halliday knew he would not miss.

Brett's right hand moved at the same time. Both weapons cleared the holsters at the exact moment. Brett had picked the second button from the top of Carewe's vest, just above the gold chain of his watch.

Two guns roared as one, and Brett felt the shock as a slug tore through his left shoulder. The second button of Carewe's vest was gone, but he was still on his feet. They were standing less than ten yards apart, Brett let go another shot, and then a third.

Carewe reached forward like a man about to dive into a tank of water, his mouth open. His face struck the second step from the bottom of the staircase, and then he crumpled.

Brett heard a door bang open at the end of the bar. He saw Johnny Larro step out, gun already in his hand. There was no time to swing his own weapon over toward Larro. A man yelled from across the room. Then a gun cracked from the top of the staircase.

Brett saw Larro spin around and cringe against the door sill. The drunken gunman's eyes shifted to the stairway. Two guns cracked simultaneously—Larro's, and the gun from the stairs.

Johnny Larro pitched forward over the bar, a hole through his forehead. Brett saw a man falling rapidly down the stairs, landing beside Abel Carewe. It was Mel Drakar.

The gambling house proprietor rolled over on his face, blood staining his white shirt front—his life's blood. He looked up at Brett and smiled.

"I want you to know, friend," he observed, "I wasn't in on Carewe's plan to set his dogs on you."

Brett nodded but he didn't say anything.

"I couldn't see that drunk wipe you out," Drakar went on feebly. Then he gasped out the rest. "I wish we'd have been on the same side, Halliday."

He was dead when Brett turned on his heel and walked woodenly from the building. Faye Chandler was running through the crowd which had gathered at the door. She grasped his arm.

"Brett!" she cried. "Brett!"

He walked along the boardwalk with

her, feeling the warm blood flow down his arm and over his chest. The dizziness was coming back again. Grimly, he plodded toward the office of the *Clarion*.

A mob of men suddenly whirled around the corner at the next block, roaring unintelligibly. Brett didn't see them. He walked into the office with Faye Chandler still at his side.

"Print this," he said to the editor. "Abel Carewe died of lead poisoning at twelve o'clock noon."

San Adams gaped at him. Brett heard Big Jim Kirby's booming voice as the man broke into the office behind him. He turned around.

"Print this," the silver man roared. "Bonanza in the Lucky Star! We hit a thirty-foot ledge of pure silver. It'll run five thousand to the ton!"

Brett Halliday started to sag. He felt Faye Chandler's arms around him and he looked at her, grinning through the mist.

"Print this," he said thickly to Sam Adams. "I'm going to marry Miss Chandler."

Adams gaped at the girl.

"Print it," she said softly. • • •

Hanged for Their Health

Here's a morbid note about early health departments along the Salinas River. The Yanquis, when they first came, found that rustling was common, law enforcement was rare. When they discovered locals in the act of stealing cattle, therefore, they took law into their own hands. But to save the feelings of the countryside, and to emphasize their own morally correct position, they called the executions "healthy hangings."

The lesson was not lost on the Mexicans and Indians for whom it was meant. They responded with the *arma blanca*—or pure weapon. This meant, simply, that when a gringo herder was stabbed, courtesy demanded that it be done with a whitewashed knife.

WESTERN STORY ROUNDUP



A MAN'S PRIDE

by Jack Cutler

Somewhere a cold deck waits for every fighting man—and even the sharpest gunfighter will make one bet without a look at the cards!

BLACKY BALL rode hard out of the blistering heat of the saguaro country, crossed Dead Flats and pulled up on the rim of a cowback hill. A faded slab sign told strangers that the town beneath was Mogollon, and warned them to tote their hardware at their own risk. A few had taken the invitation and were now fertilizing Boothill. Blacky had put them there. This was his town.

His lips slit in a broad smile as he noted there were no new holes of challenge in the sign, and his pride beat up into solid flames in his hard black eyes.

Sitting there, he soaked in the smell and the feel and the look of the country, and felt the distinct emotion of coming home. His blood was thick and salty with six weeks of the Johnson County war.

For an instant, his thoughts went back over those tense trigger weeks and, feeling the five new notches on his gun, he thought that here was the sum total of a man's life. His gun was his power and his glory. By it and for it he lived or he died. He thought that arrogantly, and for that moment his lean, dark-burned face was savage as a hawk's.

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A MAN'S PRIDE

And yet his gun by itself wasn't enough for a man. Not after he had reached the peak. It didn't take the raw edginess out of him. It didn't answer that crying need that was like the thirst of a desert-bound man for water. It didn't fill him with its mere presence as did the nearness of Silver Belle.

Thinking of her, a tightness of anticipation shot along his nerves and he narrowed his gaze down onto the town that floated on the shimmering prairie sea beneath. The light of midafternoon was a harsh zinc glare that beat all color and all shadow of the town into a slowly burning, flattened flame. The yellowish heat smashed down from the scrubbed russet hills in solid waves and rolled over the town, across the scorching land swells of the basin. The heat obliterated depth, so that a man had the feeling of riding down onto a picture drawn on a flat beach.

After a moment, he kicked his big red horse into a job downgrade, and turned into the thick, lead-gray dust the town called F Street. Nobody could remember the reason why. There were only three streets.

He reined up in front of the Coliseum and stepped into the thick gray shadows of the awnings. He paused to adjust his vision and beat the dust off his black trappings. He saw to the hang of his gun, by habit.

Silver Belle was standing in the batting doors of the honky-tonk.

He saw that her breath caught, and then sucked in deep and long before she smiled. She called out with her husky voice, "So yo're still coupled in three pieces?"

He liked the hard give-and-take of her humor, and his eyes sparked with silver lights. She was tall for a woman, tall and big-boned, with limber curves that could make a man think of heaven and go to hell. But it was her voice and her eyes that really drew a man and stamped her apart from the garish lights and blood-streaked shadows of the honky-tonks. She had spent her whole grown life in one, and yet it had never touched her. She moved through the muck clean and fresh, and the things she saw only added to her understanding. When men looked at her, they thought of those sweethearts they had never had, and they listened to her singing and remembered the days when they were very young and their hurts were healed by their mothers.

Coming up the steps toward her, he held her eyes. It struck him that she was like a full, sweet spring that a man would come back to drink at as long as he could crawl.

She took his arm, and turned inside while he slaked down his thirst with beer. Leaning with her elbows back against the bar she said, "So the Johnson County war is over?"

He nodded, "Yeah," and wished to the devil he didn't have to tell her. He made a row of rings with the wetness beneath his glass. Then he looked around at her levelly and said, "They'll be changin' the name soon. There ain't no Johnsons left."

That one black question welled up within her. He could feel it, rising like a wind. But her pride was as strong as his, and she would not weaken to ask, if he did not feel like telling.

He knew that too. It was the quality in her that had first drawn him and then held him off, so that from the first evening he had seen her, he had set her apart from the other girls. He finished his beer and carefully set down the glass. He stood there watching the froth dry upon the glass.

He said abruptly, "It was the last day, Belle. We'd kept clear of each other until then. But he stood with Old Man Johnson even after the old man told him to clear out."

For a moment her eyes closed, and the spirit seemed to drain out of her in a silent prayer. "How many of you were left?" she asked with a hollow note.

"Right there, we were even. Just Tim Latham and myself agin Curt and the old man."

"Then he didn't—didn't show the feather when the time came, Blacky?"

He laughed, a man's laugh, harsh and grim but filled with respect. "He went out shootin', and cursin' us to hell and gone!"

A quiet smile settled on her lips. She took a deep breath, and then opened her eyes and turned to him. He looked at her, filled with wonder for the unexpected steel in women.

He said, "I've never seen a tear in yore eyes, Belle."

"You never will, Blacky," she answered huskily. "Not from the unhappiness you men put on a woman!"

He didn't want to ask it, but he had to. He said edgedly, "Curt meant a heap to you, didn't he?"

"He was my cousin. I about brought him up."

"Your cousin?" he echoed, and the breath went through his teeth in a thin jet. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She made a gesture with her hands. "What's the use of a woman speaking out, Blacky? You men have to learn the hard way. Anyhow, you were both gun hands."

"Yeah," he answered dully. "It was him or me. But if I'd knowed—"

She put a hand upon his arm to stop him. After a time she said, "If you want to scrub down, you can use my room."

He nodded, and thought that was the way she had always been and the way she always would be. Her heart might be breaking, but she'd never show it. Never a tear, never a sharp or spiteful rebuke.

Still stiff from his ride, he climbed the stairs, filled with a nettled bafflement as to the strange depths of a woman.

He had hot water brought up in the tin washtub and scraped down fresh. He sprawled out on Belle's bed for a smoke and fell asleep. She came in, dressed for the evening trade, and went out without his waking.

WHEN HE came to, the air had turned cool and stars twinkled in the window. He found she had sent up fresh clothes from Dyer's store, and the feel of clean linen was good against his trail-hardened flesh. He rolled a cigarette and went out onto the balcony, and leaned there while Belle finished her song upon the stage.

The applause was thunderous. It filled him with pride that she could rate

it on her own—but there was something else there too, a sharp annoyance that these men looked upon her with the thoughts they had, just as they looked upon the other girls. There was this difference, that Belle was there for singing, and nothing else. Still, the men looked upon her, and that alone was like the rasp of a coarse file across Blacky's pride.

He went downstairs. The sudden hush was an acknowledgment to his gun prowess. He moved through the crowd with his stiff gait, soaking in small signs of homage to his glory. Men moved aside to give him room. They whispered, counted the fresh notches on his gun, nodded at him with eager grins.

He moved to the bar. Men moved down to give him room and, after a decent time, the more favored drifted up to drink with him and ask about the Johnson County war. This was the fruit that belonged to the fighting man, the adulation of the crowd.

He preened and drank it in with arrogance for several hours, until he wearied and grew terse. That was the sign, so the men left him alone. Finally, seeing him standing by himself, Belle came up.

She said, "You're right popular, Mr. Blacky Ball! You could be sheriff hereabouts if you said the word!"

He looked at her with scornful humor. "I reckon I coulda been that when I shot up the last one, four years back."

"I suppose so," she nodded, and the gaiety flattened out of her. She ordered a drink, which was unusual. Sipping at it, she gave him the gossip and funny

stories of the time he'd been away. But there was something lacking in her humor, and he thought she looked tired.

He said, "Why don't you quit and take things easy, Belle? I'd give you all the money a woman would want."

She turned her body and looked at him with a sudden, almost childish, brightness in her eyes. Her lips softened, and he had the abrupt thought that she would look prettier without the scarlet.

He remembered the look on Bill Ray's bride the day they got married. Her expression had been like this. . . .

He turned away to pour fresh drinks. When he looked back, the expression was no longer there. He wondered angrily if it had been a trick of light—or just a trick.

She was slowly shaking her head. She said, "Not while you're still gunning, Blacky."

He stared at her. "What's that got to do with it? You used to take my money!"

She gave him a dark, inscrutable smile. "That was before I liked you."

"If it was good enough for you then—" he started angrily.

She said, "Let's not fight about it. I make out all right on my own, Blacky. Let's leave it that way." She looked up at him and gave him a smile that meant nothing, except to end the matter. It was like a slap in the face, and for a moment he looked at her with the anger shaking his whole frame.

"You mean you got a notion a gun hand ain't good enough for you?" he gritted.

She spoke with strained and level

notes. "I mean when I tie up with a man, Blacky, he'll have his feet on earth. A woman's got a right to something more than just worry and the hell of a man's black pride!"

"By God!" he bit out. "There's not a better man west o' the Pecos, and I don't have to take smartin' about my pride!"

"Maybe that's it," she murmured. "You wouldn't. You'd never give an inch if it was something that breasted that pride of yours, Blacky." She stopped, and looked squarely at him. "A woman's got her pride too."

"Then keep it!" he barked. He thumbed at her sleek body, the curves embolded by the glittering sequins of her low-cut dress, then looked out at the barroom.

"If that's yore idea o' pride, let 'em have it for the looking!"

It was a whiplash that gouged into her. Her mouth tightened into a hard line.

She said, "I don't have to take that, even from you!"

"You don't have to take anything from me!" he raged. He was white and filled with murder.

"Nothin' at all!" he grated. "You can go to hell yore own way!"

HE TURNED and flung out of the doors. He rode for hours in a blind, flaming rage. It was dawn before he even realized he was on the range.

For a month he rode the high mesas like a wounded puma, stewing his slighted pride in sullen bile, lathering up a black fury of pure mayhem.

A MAN'S PRIDE

Gopher Charlie trailed down the smell of his fire and found him communing with the devil upon the highest shelf of Black Lava Steps.

There was water up there, and a piece of woods the size of a hat, and wind like a scrubbing brush, and miles of black bare lava that had frozen in its angry boil to gobble the blue-gold horizon of the sky.

Gopher considered that this was just about as desolate a place as a man could wish for—if he was trying his damndest to go loco.

"Purty," he allowed. "Ain't nary a thing to distract the buzzards from watchin' the last twitch of a man's big toe."

"Men before you have talked themselves to hell!" Blacky said flatly. "If she sent you out to find me, ride back and tell her I said that goes for her too!"

"She ain't nary mentioned you," Gopher told him. "'Cept once to say you could own this country if you wasn't so dead set on livin' by yore guns."

"She don't seem to set much store by a man's manhood!" Blacky snarled. "What she wants is a preacher!"

Gopher took out a twist of tobacco, snagged off a chaw and regarded Blacky with a watery blue eye. "I done lived eighty years," he allowed. "At my time it don't matter much if a man finishes his life now or later some time."

"If yo're set to read the scriptures," Blacky snapped, "don't!"

"I ain't," Gopher said, "but I tanned yore bottom when you was a kid. I reckon I'm the only one to set you

straight on this. You know who Silver Belle is?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Blacky demanded.

"Got a heap to do with it," Gopher said. "She's old Irish Tighe's daughter. There was a time when there were fifteen Tighe men over in Kansas, and every one of 'em as good a gun hand as you. They were too plumb proud to do anythin' but gunnin', and they all died with their boots on, without leavin' their women folks a bean."

"A woman takes me the way I am or she don't!" Blacky rasped. "If she don't like guns, that's too damned bad. I do."

"It's likely she hates 'em worse'n pizen," Gopher said cantankerously. "Bein' as that's how it is, ya ought to give the gal credit—"

Blacky turned, and there were cold lights in his eyes. "Tell her this, and then we'll forget it. When she wants me, she'll forget the guns and her damned pride and come crawlin' on her knees!"

Gopher spit. "Yo're a hard man, Blacky, but it ain't no skin off my back! Well, what I rid all over t'hell and to tell you is this—Pete Columbo's headin' over from Las Cruces."

Blacky snapped to his feet like a straightened whip. His dark face looked like black granite, and hellfire burned in his eyes. "I gun-whipped him out o' this country once!"

"Seems like he forgot it," Gopher mumbled. "But he ain't forgot Silver Belle. He was tellin' in Las Cruces he aims to come over and take her back onto Pecan country with him."

Blacky's breath sucked in between his teeth with a long dry grate. He wheeled on the ball of one foot and moved to the edge of the shelf. He stood as if carved of flint, staring down at the line of rusted hills that crawled across the umber plain.

Pete Columbo was the one man in the world who had ever breasted Blacky Ball and got away with it. Blacky had licked him, but he hadn't licked him hard enough. And Columbo had an advantage—he didn't mind shooting in the back.

"Knowin' that sidewinder," Gopher growled from behind him, "I'd reckon he'd take Belle even if she didn't say so. Less'n there's somebody to stop him, that is, which there ain't."

Blacky said, with a voice like wire, "A gun hand wasn't good enough for her when she didn't need one. Let her figure this on her own."

"Ain't nobody had the nerve to tell her what Columbo's comin' for," Gopher said. "She thinks he's come gunnin' after you."

Blacky spun on the old-timer with murderous suspicion. "You damned sure she didn't put you up to this?"

Gopher snorted. "You think she ain't got as much pride as you?"

"If you ever tell her anythin' about this, I'll peel yore hide off in strips, Gopher!" Blacky said thickly. "I'll take care of Columbo, but it ain't got nothin' to do with her, see? Right after, I'm lightnin' out for Montany!"

He whistled to his horse, slapped on the saddle, hit leather and raked the animal full tilt down a hogback shoulder that was suicide. The sun beat

like a furnace blast out of the molten sky. He came onto the mesa, and rode across blinding lemon-colored sands toward low purple buttes that swam in the shimmering, citron-tinted heat. His lips pulled back in a wicked grin.

"She don't like killin'," he muttered to himself. "She'll see what killin's like before this day is out!"

He turned cross-country and rode like the devil with black murder in his soul. His nerves were throbbing and his scalp tight against his head. This was no condition for a man to buck an ace gunman in, he knew—but right now he didn't give a damn.

He drove the animal mercilessly across the mesquite-mottled table, dropped down a cherry and juniper-strangled gulch and turned through a dry waterbed into town.

It was evening now. He left his horse in the shed behind the Coliseum, moving with his saddle-stiffened gait around to the front stoop. He stood there, building a cigarette, accustoming his eyes to the sunset-reddened light. He spotted Columbo's horse down the hitchrack a piece, trail-worn and heavy with the thick sweet smell of Pecos mud beating through its dust, like the keen smell of fire on a prairie wind.

There was a second horse that looked as if it was paired. As he thought of the odds he faced, the spirit welled up in him like a strong, straight flame.

HE STRUCK a match, and its light gleamed from the surface of his eyes as from old black ice. He stood listening to the voice of Silver Belle coming from inside.

He listened, thinking that she could bring smiles to a man dying of thirst and fever, and the relief of tears to men half crazed with loneliness and the bitter madness of the range. The tune caught him, and it was golden and mel-low and filled with peace. It held all of those things that a man strives for without ever knowing what they are—until it is too late.

Her song ended, and suddenly the place inside was a chaos of roaring, stomping, whooping acclaim.

The fire of mayhem boiled up in his veins. But this time there was none of that wild and turbulent joy of battle. There was only the flaming black and bitter anger, and his nerves were taut—so taut that when two wild mustang hunters crowded through the door, his chest arched and he throbbed like an overtight spring.

The wranglers recognized him and with an excited, "Forget somethin'!" they grinned and wheeled back in to wait for the fun.

He felt the palms of his hands suddenly moist. Shocked within himself at this sign of weakness, he thought of those countless tales of great fighters who had suddenly met the day when their spunk drained out of them like water from a sink.

He snorted, trying to throw off the thought. He wiped his hands upon his chaps, letting them drift across the familiar notches of his low-slung guns. Here was the thing that held a man's life.

Inside, Belle's voice cut throbbingly through the tumult of applause, her song lifting and welling through the up

roar, stilling it like the sweep of a great wave. He damned the arrogant nerve of her, not waiting out the applause. He had the final, bitter thought that she had risen to such popularity she felt herself too good for him. That was why she had turned him down. . . .

Pitching his smoke out into the thick dust of the street, he felt the hang of his belts, and pushed on into the Coliseum.

He stood inside the door, surveying the room. Only two men failed to have their attention riveted on Silver Belle—the two wranglers who had seen him and gone back in. He moved over to the bar, his steps balanced but tighter at the knees than usual. He was leaning on the end of the bar when the song ended, his lips thin and flat against his teeth, his eyes filled with unholy lights.

The men at the bar turned back to their drinks, and directly cater-corner was Columbo and his sidekick. Columbo's gaze met his, and his face froze in a kind of chilled gray shadow.

Blacky thought there was no need in waiting. He might as well make the fight before he got a bullet in his back.

He asked flatly, "You come up here sparkin' yore end again, Columbo?"

Columbo's eyes narrowed. In that strange way that a room full of men senses a fight, the still ringing applause died out and gave way to silence. Men washed back from the bar in a solid wave, leaving the three in possession.

Columbo said, "A man ain't always the same twice, Blacky."

"You are!" Blacky announced with a flat, metallic insult. "Yo're yellow inside and out."

Columbo sucked in his breath, and in that moment was all the wild and desperate tenseness Blacky knew so well. Here were the countless little things that should be like warmth in a man's blood. The room filled with the red of sunset mixing with the smoky yellow light of the big lamps. The dry cough in somebody's throat, the scrape of a spur across the floor. And in front of him, those narrowed, watchful eyes, probing, feeling the other man out, alert to the smallest sign that would give the temper of the other's nerves and guts.

"You're talkin' kinda tough," Columbo rasped. "Like mebbe you was hankerin' fer trouble."

Here it was, the same old game. The talk, the build-up while keyed nerves steadied, the stall for that split-second advantage over the other man.

Blacky's lips pulled back in a thin laugh. "You're right for once, hombre!" He took a quick half-pace back and to the side. "Draw, Columbo! I'll give you part of what you come for!"

Columbo's hand had not left his drink. Without moving his arm from the bar, he swung half around to face Blacky Ball.

He forced a hard grin and said, "Looks like you dealt the hand, Blacky. But it's all right. Yup, I'd say it's all right—Bob and Charley!"

His hand was a blur toward his gun, and in that split instant Blacky knew that he had stepped into a trap. Beyond Columbo, to the left, another hombre was streaking for his gun—and way over, on a line with himself, a third. And in that flashing instant of eternity, Blacky knew what maybe Belle had

always known—that somewhere a cold deck is waiting for a fighting man, and that even the sharpest gun hand would some day make his bet without a good look at the cards.

Columbo's and Blacky drew at the same instant, throwing lead in a twin blasting of the silence. Blazing fire tore through Blacky's right shoulder. His arm was numbing and just able to swing the gun on the man beyond Columbo's twisting body as he dropped. The second man's bullet tore into the muscles of his forearm, thudding his gun against the hard wood of the bar. His feet went out from under him. Still jerking at his second gun, he pinned down his own arm and lay there staring at the third gunman.

"So you done reached Boothill at last, Blacky?" the man called, and his mouth was a wicked grin of murder. He had his hammer thumbed back.

Then the man's head jerked back, and a harsh, throttled cry broke from his throat. Before he pitched and slumped, the short, heavy bark of a derringer rolled down the room.

He slumped slowly, the gun swinging like a pendulum upon his finger, and then he crashed upon the floor.

BLACKY COULDN'T move for numbness, and the sudden riot of noise was a vague and misty roar. His eyes closed, and darkness came up in endless and freezing waves to clutch him. Somebody ripped his shirt away, and he heard, as in a dream, Doc Cranley's curse. Then, flowing through all the acrid smell of powder and blood and the thick, stale odors of the bar,

came the clean warm scent of Silver Belle.

Cranley growled, "You pinked him neat, Belle, or he'da finished Blacky."

"Thank God!" she said, and was down there in the blood and sawdust, gathering his head tenderly against her breast. Through the confusion of pain Blacky figured it out—the derringer had been hers. Belle, who hated killing, had shot a man dead for him!

To get down the room that fast, she must have been ready for this, and guessed when the two mustang-hunters came back in that he was outside.

Somewhere behind all this, a man was bellowing, "Sure, we got enough beer in town fer a fust-rate funeral! But where in hell we goin' to get a Bible?"

Doc Cranley had hold of his arm, and he was saying, "He's all right, but he won't be doin' no more fast trigger work ag'in. Them trigger muscles is plumb tore up!"

Blacky opened his eyes at that, and his vision cleared upon Belle's face. He said faintly, with surprise, "Why, Belle, yor'e cryin'!"

She gave a single sob, and dropped her lips to his cheek and brushed it with a kiss. She murmured passionately, "I was praying you wouldn't get here, Blacky! I thought they'd get you!"

And that was the answer that had never occurred to him. Looking up into her eyes, he saw that was how it had been with her all along.

Closing his eyes, he murmured tiredly, "Did I tell you a wedding ring went with that offer? And cows?"

And, lifting her face across his body, she smiled through her tears. ● ● ●

DEATH DROPS IN

by Harold Preece

**Meet the most hospitable man in Texas
—whose hand could deal a warm
shake—or a warmer dose of lead!**

FROM BULL CREEK to the Big Sandy, everybody said Uncle Dick Preece was the most hospitable man in that whole stretch of the Texas hill country. Ten years after the Civil War, he was bedding and boarding everybody, ex-Unionist and ex-Secesh, even if he still sported on his faded blue jacket a string of sharpshooter's medals earned by blasting Confederate Texans while fighting with Mr. Lincoln's hillbilly Texans down in Louisiana. He was as proud of those medals as he was of being distant kin to Abe Lincoln himself. For Uncle Dick's full name was Richard Lincoln Preece, and he was born in Kentucky not too far from the home of the Lincoln family proper.

Maybe I'm a little-bit prejudiced because Uncle Dick was my granddad, and I was born in the cabin on Bull Creek that he built after four long years of bushwhacking and being bushwhacked from the Rio Grande River to the Sabine. Some of my tribe on Bull Creek have told me privately that the old man drew certain lines about his different guests even if he was never known to turn anybody away. When the Methodist Circuit Rider, Brother Hocutt, came through

the country, Uncle Dick would go out into the cedar brakes and round up one of his fat hogs for the slaughter. When two young Mormon missionaries came through from Utah, he directed my grandma to go out and kill a couple of old hens that had stopped laying.

But shrewd as he was about men or horses, he found it hard to figure the exact rating of the two men—one tall and blond, the other short and dark—who rode up to his cabin that sundown of May 13, 1875, and asked to spend the night. My granddad got up from his seat on the porch when the two lit from their horses, and walked down the yard to meet them, holding out the hand that could give a man a warm shake or a warmer dose of lead.

"Name's Preece," he said. "Mighty glad to see you strangers. Let me lead your hosses around to the stable. Then we'll set down to a bite o' supper that the woman'll be gittin' ready."

"Howdy, Mr. Preece," the short dark man replied, returning his handshake. "We're just passin' through lookin' for some ponies that strayed. Saw your house and thought we'd stay tonight if you got room to spare." Then the tall,

blond man also put out his hand and thanked Uncle Dick for taking them in. Neither of them gave any name. But Uncle Dick was a gentleman of the frontier, and you never asked a man in frontier Texas his name if he kept it, like his six-shooter or his bandanna, to himself.

After the horses had been unsaddled and bedded down for the night, Uncle Dick took the strangers into the cabin and introduced them to the family as simply "two gentlemen who're stayin' the night if they can stand our poor victuals." Aunt Kate, my grandma, looked questioningly at her husband as she lit the fire in the iron stove. Uncle Dick looked carefully at his guests, thought for a minute, then told her:

"Fry up a couple o' them young ducks that's runnin' loose from the winter's hatchin'."

When Grandma called supper, Uncle Dick told his guests to be seated in two chairs in front of the window. The tall blond man, who spoke but little, frowned slightly and remained standing. But the dark man said easily:

"If 'twouldn't trouble you, Mr. Preece, we'd like to set away from that window. Both of us got a pain in the back from sleepin' on cold ground so much."

The family shifted around to let the pair sit away from the window. As Uncle Dick was saying the blessing, he was remembering the time when he had been accused of shooting a Secesh informer on Bull Creek, after the hillbilly Texans had been mustered out of Mr. Lincoln's army and come home to even up some old scores. The Secesh had been sitting with his back to the window, eat-

ing supper, when his head had rolled suddenly into his plate of turnip greens. And as Uncle Dick watched the strangers eat heartily of the fried duck, topped off with one of Aunt Kate's dewberry pies, he thought that many a man, for reasons best known to himself, hated sitting too close to any window.

After supper, the pair joined the family before the fireplace in the big room. The big fellow puffed nervously on his pipe, shaking it out and refilling it every few minutes. But the smaller one puffed serenely in long contented draughts as his smoke rings curled and twined around the rafters of the cabin. My dad, then a little fellow not quite four, liked him and sidled up to him, looking at the stranger with the friendly curiosity of a child. The stranger put a friendly arm around him and said:

"You're a handsome lookin' young feller, Sonny. What's your name?"

And my dad, with the same friendliness at four that he still had at seventy-four, answered, "Davie. What's your name?"

The visitor hesitated a minute and answered, "Well, good friends like you just call me Frank."

"Frank! Frank!" my dad shouted. "I got an Uncle Frank. But he gives me nickels."

The stranger threw back his head and roared. "You win that play, Sonny," he said. "Here's a whole big nickel for you."

Davie Preece jumped into the man's lap and felt strange fingers stroking his flaming red curls. Then he bounced down and ran into the next room. In a few minutes he came running back, dragging on the floor his daddy's old blue

Army jacket with its raft of medals. In his right hand, he held a medal pulled loose from the rotting thread of the jacket. Proudly, he handed it to the stranger who called himself Frank.

"That's for you," he shouted. "That's for my good friend, Frank."

The big man jumped up from his chair, and the "damn" on his lips could be heard across the room even if gentlemen weren't supposed to cuss before lady folks in Texas. But with the gracefulness of a cat, the smaller man also stood up, and said:

"Well, that's a mighty purty little trick you handed me, Davie. But I might lose it, travelin' around this way. S'pose I just give it to your daddy to keep for me till I'm around again."

Smilingly, the stranger handed the medal to my granddad.

"Don't know what all them trinkets will ever be worth to me—maybe just somethin' for the young'uns to divide up after I'm gone over the trail. Lots o' times, I wished I could have cooked 'em up in a stew back there in Louisiana when it was Texas man a-fightin' Texas man—and startin' it up all over ag'in when they got back to Texas."

MY OLDER uncles and aunts have told me that the big man's face was gray and cloudy like the haze over the Packsaddle Mountains when my granddad began talking about the Civil War. But they say that the little man just kept puffing easy on his pipe.

"Well, I guess ever' state was a heap split up all over, Mr. Preece. But now it's all done with—and a lot of good fellers on both sides done with, too."

But Uncle Dick was never a man to take a hint when it came to talking about the Civil War.

"Texas seceded from the Union—but Bull Creek seceded from the Confederacy. I started the first Texas outfit, right here on Bull Creek, to fight for the Union. We was the Texas Mountain Eagles. We done rode and shot our way to Mexico. We stayed there till we got a ship down to New Orleans that our kind of folks had took from the Secesh. Then they swore us into the Union Army."

"I'm just sorry 'bout one thing," he declared. "I'm sorry they didn't send me to Missouri instead o' Louisiana. I'd a liked to got a crack at that thievin' guerilla, Quantrell, and them James boys that started out with him like pups bay-in' after the big dog. I ain't braggin'. But there wouldn't be any no-'count Jesse and Frank James around today."

The big man jumped up again, and spat noisily into the fireplace. The clouds on his face were turning into a storm, so one of my old uncles told me. The little man flinched, but then quickly said to the other:

"Turn your back around to the fire. Heat'll be good for that pain in it."

Uncle Dick looked straight at the big fellow. "See my woman over there," he said harshly. "She comes from Missouri whéré Quantrell and the James boys come from. She was a Shannon 'fore she hitched up with me. Well, Quantrell and that she-panther, Belle Starr, who spied for him, just about killed her whole family out 'cause they was Union and wouldn't throw in with the Secesh."

They say that the big man looked hard at my grandma. But the hard look

he gave him in return maybe stayed his hand that was moving toward the poker hanging by a nail at the end of the fireplace.

Then the little man arose.

"Well, folks, it's gittin' late, and we got a hard ride tomorrow. Don't trouble yourself none 'bout fixin' us a bed, Miz Preece. We'll just sleep on our saddle blankets in that summerhouse you got out in the yard."

Grandma may have wondered why men with pains in their backs would want to sleep on the ground in that brush arbor called the "summerhouse." But she didn't let on that she had any doubts. The two left the cabin. Uncle Dick, sleeping lightly, heard his guests get up in the early morning hours and fetch their horses from the stable. But the pair were around at sunup for breakfast. And it was a light breakfast—corn dodgers and coffee—that they got instead of the usual Preece breakfast that made our kinfolks and neighbors want to come and stay all night at Uncle Dick's.

They had not been gone more than an hour when my great-uncle, Frank Preece, constable for the mountain section of Travis County, rode up to announce that he was on the trail of the James boys. "Robbed the stagecoach below Austin, two days ago," he told his brother. "Got off with three thousand dollars—the sheriff down at Austin figures they're headed this way."

Uncle Dick started laughing. "Frank," he said, "I figger you don't want to meet up with the James boys any more than the sheriff down there at Austin. If you had, you'd have come over last night when we had 'em here for company. So

light down while Katie gits you some breakfast—a real Preece breakfast."

By the time that Uncle Dick finished telling him about the visitors, Uncle Frank had decided that the James boys had got too long a start to go traipsing after them. "But how did you know who they was, Dick?" he pestered.

"You can't fool an old ranger," Uncle Dick replied. "I hunted down plenty of fellers like them 'fore the war done come along and split up Texas. I knowed them two was on the scout when they wouldn't set with their backs to the window."

"Then I started figurin' who they was, when the little feller told Davie that his name was Frank—same as your'n. That talk about Quantrell and the Secesh was a way of stirrin' up the hive to git at the honey. But the tall feller, Jesse, just naturally give it away when I let out that Katie was a Shannon and from Missouri. I could see then they recognized each other."

Uncle Dick paused, and his eyes were fixed admiringly on Aunt Kate, putting around with the kitchen chores. "But, shucks, woman sense beats man sense in a heap of ways. I was so r'iled I clean forgot myself. Katie didn't want no shootin' with the kids around. But I reckon it's the first time that a Shannon ever cooked up for a James. And I just didn't have the heart to make her fix a big breakfast for 'em."

Uncle Frank finished his breakfast, and went home to plow his corn. My dad kept the nickel that Frank James gave him until he took his first trip into town at the age of ten. Then he spent it for a glass of pink lemonade. ● ● ●

DEAD MAN'S RIDE

"There'll be one drink left in that canteen and one bullet left in that gun! I'll see you at the end of Dead Man's Ride—if you're man enough to reach there!"

by *David Crewe*

THE OUTLAW stood with high heels planted wide, slowly cocking and uncocking Medrick's gun. His expression was gloating and brutal. The desert moon mixed its red light into fluid shadows upon his face. It made a vicious black gash of his mouth.

He stared down at Medrick, sprawled as his horse had thrown him upon the barren hill. He had felt Medrick's back and knew that it was badly sprained. It gave him a malicious satisfaction that Medrick's end would be without glory and in pain. They were a long way out on the desert, but he had a sound horse. The other man's horse cut a solid block of shadow against the drifting moonlight, its head down and one leg lifted and hanging grotesquely broken beneath the knee.

"Do you savvy this Jornada del Muerto, friend?" the outlaw growled amiably. "'The Journey of the Dead

Man' to gringos." He stopped and his rasping chuckle was thick with anticipation. "Not a lick of water for ninety miles on this trail, Medrick! Ya'll know what the name means before yer crawlin' end!"

"It's only twenty miles back to Miligan," Medrick rasped through his pain. "Latigo, you better shoot me dead or I'll crawl every inch to slit yore yellow hide!"

"Oh, now," Latigo chuckled. "I wouldn't go killin' a nice boy like you, Medrick! I've done got real fond of you trailin' me like a shadow this whole year!"

Medrick lay there paralyzed and cursed Latigo Hansen. Maybe it had been a mistake not to kill him when there had been a chance. But a skunk could drop from a bullet and friends would twist the story that he had gone out in glory. Killing was too good for

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a man who would leave a woman alone in a trail camp to die, as Latigo had. That woman had been the sister of Medrick's best friend.

Killing was a way too good, and what he had done was to grimly shadow the outlaw's trail. He had risked bullets and ambush. Twice he had nearly met his end. But he had held on, never quite catching up, but with Latigo always knowing he was just behind.

At Milligan, he had seen Latigo's nerve begin to crack. Latigo had seen him ride in the far end of town. In sudden panic at Medrick's grim tenacity he had bolted out onto the desert with Medrick pounding through the night behind. He had not even turned to build a fight.

"Yore yellow streak broke through," Medrick growled from the ground. "You'd have died sobbing of thirst out here tomorrow, Latigo, with the journey still ahead of you and me cutting you off behind!"

"I could shoot ya and no man could prove that it was murder," Latigo snarled. "That's what ya'd like! But I aim to leave ya alive, Medrick. I wouldn't want 'em to think I shot a man who was down."

He threw back his head and his harsh laughter lifted up against the desert night. No man could think up a death as cruel and merciless as dying of thirst beneath the desert sun. He rolled a cigarette and hunkered down and let the smoke drift across the other's tight, drawn face. He chuckled, knowing Medrick's pain and what he would give for a smoke right then.

"What I aim to do is real charity,"

Latigo taunted. "I aim to leave ya yore hoss and yore gun and yore canteen, brother."

His lips pulled back and the shadowed light cut a dark red line upon his teeth. "Ain't that decent of me? But yore hoss is crippled, and there'll be only one drink in that canteen, and one bullet in the gun!"

"That bullet will be yore end!" the other rasped.

Latigo laughed. "I ain't leavin' the gun in yore hand!"

His mouth turned vicious. He stood up abruptly and kicked Medrick until a tortured grunt of pain burst through his set teeth. Then he went to work. He jacked the shells out of Medrick's belt and all but one from his gun. He got Medrick's canteen from his saddle, and drank, and stood pouring the remainder of the water out upon the cooling ground.

"Sounds kind of musical, don't it?" he mocked Medrick's thirsty eyes. He left one good drink and threw down the canteen and gun just out of reach. He swung up into his saddle and chuckled brutally, "Nice country for a quiet little crawl, Medrick!" and belching raw laughter, swung his horse back toward Milligan.

Medrick lay there, unable to move, with the pain jabbing through him in hot flames. He listened to the dust-dulled tattoo of hoofs sink into the vast, motionless quiet that lay across the desert. No solitary sound broke the stillness except that vague, scarcely audible whisper of the ever creeping sands.

Medrick felt the fever rising in him.

His hatred of Latigo burned like a sharp clear flame through the swirling shadows of his pain. He had no sense of time. He did not know that he slept. Except that one instant it was deep dead dark and then he looked again and the east was filling with pale light.

The desert was cold and hard and sterile, a place of stark outlines and fluid washing shadows. A man crazy or dying might go to a place like this. He was not absolutely sure he was not dead.

He stared at the solid line of the San Andreas, black against the desert dawn. The colors were weird and off-tint here. They belonged to a place of death. A broad band of purple lay just above the mountains, and then a strip of murky orange-green melting into a thin fringe of rose hue.

The colors pulsed and changed. Light filtered obliquely into the sky and struck down onto the desert. The air began to warm while the ground was still chill.

He saw that he was on a hill of brown and gray flat stones scattered upon loose shingle. He called to his horse and it lifted its head and there was a pitiful expression in its eyes. The use of his voice ripped along his throat. He remembered that he had just one drink left.

He looked at the canteen and then realized the horse was looking at it too. It was thirsty and its thirst was in its trusting eyes.

It watched him this way because it knew that, somehow, he would take care of things. He always had. It waited patiently

A MAN COULDN'T stand having his horse look at him like that. Hugh Medrick cursed and ripped away his gaze. In doing this he moved his head and realized the paralysis had left him. He was filled with soreness and pain, but his joints moved and his tired muscles answered.

He sat up and pulled the canteen to him and the smell of water aroused a fierce craving in him for a full drink. He let the water lie against his lips, soaking a very small drink in with bare sips.

The horse smelled the water and made a plaintive rumble in its chest. Hugh looked at it and cursed again. He examined his belts, but Hansen had not left him an extra shot. Maybe he had guessed Hugh's love for the animal and just what this would mean. On the desert, a man saved the last bullet for himself.

He looked at his gun a long time, feeling a sting sharp against the insides of his eyes. Then he looked at the horse and said thickly, "*Vaya con Dios!*" and sent the last bullet smashing into the animal's head.

The horse dropped in its tracks. It kicked once and with one weary rumble, lay dead. The sun lifted in a ball of angry red out of the green and purple banks of haze into the gold-blue sky. The impact of heat was instant, and held solid body.

He sat flexing himself and rubbing the soreness out of his back. The country lay stark and clear in this early yellow light. He studied it, soaking in the smallest details before the haze and heat closed in.

The Jornada del Muerto was a long trough lying between bare, sterile ranges that crawled, low and unfriendly, on both sides. The San Andreas were dark brown and scrubbed to eastward. Westward, the Fra Cristobals cut a man off from the Rio Grande.

The Fra Cristobals were not completely dry, but they were footed with rolling purple lava swells and gray sandstone bluffs. Men desperate with thirst had scraped their bodies to the bones trying to crawl up into those hills. But no man in memory had even gotten over the tumbled creases of the foot-rock.

A man's only way out was to follow the trough of the desert. Seventy miles in one direction, twenty in the other . . . straight for the black upthrust of the dead volcano.

Hugh Medrick thought of these things with a grim spark in his steel-gray eyes. Two miles an hour would be fast travel on a moonlight night for a man afoot over that kind of country. That would be a man with all his strength and with water. No sick man without water could really hope to last out five miles during the terrible heat of day.

The buzzards came out of nowhere and reminded him of his fate as they began circling overhead. But there was a wrong to be paid in blood, and vengeance was a sacred thing. Medrick's lips pulled wire-tight against his teeth. He rasped to himself, "I'll make it! The devil couldn't stop me from getting Latigo!"

He took out his knife and cut a full inch off each of his high cowboy heels.

He would need his chaps against heat and prickly brush and rocks, but their weight would drain his strength and he shucked them. He did the same with his gunbelt.

The gun he stood looking at with considerations. A gun with no bullets was of no use and it could grow heavy on a march. Yet a man's gun was a symbol. It was the first thing he bought in life, and the last thing he parted with before he died. Even empty, its possession was a sign to a man that he was not licked.

With a touch of sardonic humor at man's eternal vanity and damned fool pride, he jammed the gun into his pants. Then he swung his canteen over his shoulder and with a last hard look at his dead horse, he turned down grade. Within his mind was etched a clear, detailed picture of the desert toward Milligan. Within two hours he would not be able to see a mile ahead.

The sun blasted the last clouds of the sky. It stripped the land of all shadow and all color, flattening all perspective and third dimension. The brash light and heat smashed off the desert, burning the glare into his eyes. He lurched for rises which were not there and stumbled upon level ground for holes and hollows which were still ahead.

The sun was slowly melting into a burning circle that slipped into the simmering, brassy sky. The air grew steadily hotter and more lifeless. The heat sucked at a man's strength and the air no longer gave it back. The air was burned out, dead.

Thirst came up in Medrick like a consuming thing, forming in him a violent

urge to drain the canteen and go to hell. He came to the edge of the salt flats. He stopped, his tall, lean body swaying while he stared through slitted eyelids into the molten white glare ahead. The whole desert was burning, but spots like these were hotter by thirty or forty degrees. A man crossing those flats under a high sun could actually fry to death.

He could work around the edge, but there might be arroyos and impassable rocky cuts. In any case, it would mean four or five extra miles and his knees were already shaking like castanets. His throat was crowded and there was a thirst craving on his tongue, and he needed water to think this thing out.

But later he would need those precious drops more if he meant to reach Milligan. He thought of Latigo, probably standing over a cool glass of foaming beer this second, boasting of his desert ride by moonlight. Men would get curious in time and ride out to see what had happened. They would find the picked, bleached skeleton of a man and farther out, a horse. They would read sign, and credit Latigo with having outridden his pursuer, and give him credit for being a pretty shrewd, tough hand.

Medrick pictured that and hatred washed through him with iron resolve. He let the drink grow, and pulled his bandanna high and his hat low, and breasted the fierce white glare of the flats ahead.

The salt kicked up a fine dust that worked through his clothes and lay stinging and eating at the sweat creases of his body. His feet turned leaden and

his gauntlets became an oppressive weight upon the pendulum of his arms. But his gauntlets were the only things saving the sensitive flesh of his wrists from searing. Already, the backs of his hands were a metallic black.

He began to lurch and felt a wildness coming to life within him. A man felt those things, but he could not always control them. He had a desperate desire to wolf that water, and another desire to stumble into a run for the far edge of the flats, where he had promised himself a drink. He fought both urges, and suppressed them with the grim determination of his sworn hate.

HE PITCHED ahead like a rudderless boat on a high sea. He stumbled out upon the other side and twenty yards beyond, his body noticed the relief from the fierce burning heat. He tumbled to the ground and lay there, sucking in great breaths through his dust-choked throat and salt-cracked lips.

His senses were reeling and he had never known a desire so strong as this thirst in his whole life. He sprawled there, fighting it with grim consciousness of his condition, fighting the wildness in him down until his heart had quieted and he was calm. The ring of Latigo's brutal mockery was a sound inside of him that set a solid rhythm behind his fluctuating intensities of thought.

I'll get there, Medrick thought, if I have to crawl on raw bones!

It was a hard and solid and unswerving hatred and it gave him control of himself. He uncorked the canteen and

let the scarce water rest for long periods against his lips. Then he let it slip through in two small sips.

He took off his boots and ripped a hunk from his shirt to wipe his swelling feet and ankles clean. Jerking them back on he realized the drain upon his strength and that he could not risk taking off his boots again. But the rest and cleaning had eased the shooting fires within his feet.

His mind was not sharp and he turned it to various thoughts one by one, considering infinitesimal things upon which a man's life might depend. He studied the oblique angle at which the sun struck down through the shimmering haze, and the thickness and quality of the haze itself. He squinted up through the heaving glare and saw the buzzards still circling in black specks overhead.

He cursed them, but they were a helpful sign. It was not yet high noon. Not even the buzzards could stand the reflection of heat off the desert during four hours of the day. It was a grim reminder of what a man afoot still had to face. His jaw set like an anvil as he pulled up his dust mask and heaved to his feet.

The ground began to swell and he fought up and down the troughs and through the captured pools of burning heat. The heat was turning to something alive and malicious. It fought him now, pulling at him with hot tentacles, burning the last life out of the air he breathed.

He tumbled into the cut of a drybed and lay for a time with his whole body a numb, pulsing pain. He cursed the

desert and cursed the glare and cursed the sun up in the sky. He had another precious sip of water and it was a struggle to tear the canteen from his mouth and replace the cap. His lips were thick, and he guessed black, and there was a hard edge to the opening cracks.

He fought his way out of the shallow trench and gained the desert floor again. His hazed senses had lost direction, and no landmark was discernible through that glare. But behind him the glare was white, and ahead of him it was red. He put these vague signs upon the map of the desert etched in his mind, and from these simple facts picked a trail ahead.

His eyes were stabbing pains and there were myriad little fires within his head. He lurched into a pit of white fire, and came up short, feeling the crunching sands beneath his feet and filled with a bleak fear that he had circled back into the salt flat. Then the smell was sharp and clear upon his memory, and he realized he had wandered into the gypsum beds.

The heat was a cruel and oppressive thing, and the glare a torture to his eyes. But there was this fact and it brought a wild and savage twist of triumph to his lips--the gypsum beds were in the right direction for the trail to Milligan.

He stumbled into this white sea of sliding sands. He fell and clambered up and fell again, but he clawed ahead. His mind was now almost a solid flame, but the rhythm of Latigo's voice came like a battle hymn through the heaving glare. He was crazing with thirst and he knew it, but he fought over the

white dunes as a flagged swimmer fights toward land through a rolling sea.

He tripped suddenly and was flung out full length, and through the confusion of his thoughts felt his weakness and thought, this is the end! Then he saw that it was an upthrust of stone that had thrown him, and blinking against that brash glare, saw there was color to the stone. It was red. He lifted himself and studied the small island of his vision, and felt the surge of fierce feelings. He was out of the dunes and on the red boulder field! He had covered seven miles and there was only the scarcest shadow on the north side of the rock!

"Latigo!" he yelled savagely within himself. "Watch out!"

He shook the canteen and there was just the barest liquid sound. He could not trust himself to put the canteen to his lips. He shook out his bandanna and dipped a corner in. He sucked on this dusty dampness, and the taste was sharp, but the wetness was like nectar from the gods. It did not satisfy, but it eased the raw swelling of his mouth.

He lay in the baking shadow of the rock and slept. When he awakened, the shadow had stretched a foot and crept around. His throat was a burning sore clean down into his chest. But there was fresh strength in his muscles, if he could hang onto his head.

He had the last few drops of water and lay sucking the last dampness from the canteen. Then he threw the canister away. He stood and took stock of himself. His eyes were swollen slits, his lips a solid mass of cracks. His hands were raw, his whole body bruised, his

clothes ripped and the flesh beneath burned, and on one leg was an ugly gash. "But yo're alive, boy!" he told himself with fierce grimness. "And not done in yet!"

He pushed on, and in midafternoon climbed a low barrier of sandstone and for that brief space was lifted partially clear of the burned-out ground heat. Ahead of him the desert licked up red flames against a wall of yellow haze, but there was some air. A man could breathe. He slit the sides of his boots with gashes to relieve his swelling feet, and then after deliberation between the gun and knife, threw the knife away. Every ounce of weight, every smallest drain upon a man's strength, counted now. He was a fool to go on lugging the empty gun. But it was his sign, and in some way it meant more to him than it cost.

He pushed on into a field of glittering copper mica as flat as a frying pan and just as hot. His senses were completely fuddled now. He staggered and lurched and fought ahead, half crazed, with that rhythm of Latigo's laughter the only clear thing in his thoughts.

HE PICKED up two round pebbles and sucked upon them and their smoothness helped relieve the swelling of his tongue. The heat became a moving sea around him. He cursed it, but he swam through it, and fought his way up every time it smashed him down. The going got rough and terrible for falls. He stopped and fought for consciousness, and realized the heaving haze held dark browns and purples and maroons. He was in malpais, with its

sharp, jagged cutting surfaces—but the malpais was three quarters of the way back across the desert!

By Mighty, I will get him yet! he thought with wild determination and a terrible grin came upon his burned and swollen face, and he plunged on.

Dimly, some fact fought for consciousness and after a long space he realized evening was coming on the land. The heat and haze and glare were still there, but the heat eddied and swirled in the way of a turning tide. The glare began to lessen and the haze to fall back. The form and color of sunset wheeled slowly up into the sky. Suddenly as the lifting of a curtain, the outlines of the Cristobals formed a horizon out of the haze against the riot of colors in the west.

It was a challenge that reached clean through a man's thirst and weakness and mounting craziness to rouse that primitive instinct of survival. A man in his condition could lie down right there and let himself go crazy and be dead in half an hour. Or he could curse everything in heaven or hell and struggle on.

Medrick cursed and stumbled on. He staggered into the rolling, fissured creases of the lava beds at sundown. The lava was blistering and he had to guard against stumbling into pockets of volcanic ash, but the black color was a relief to his burning eyes. The wild, shooting flames began to subside into a numbed unconsciousness. He pulled himself, crawling, up onto the lava steps as the black shadows grew heavy and streaked out across the last pale color in the western sky.

He lay there gasping and watching the evening star, and knowing he had reached his limit. He was done in. Most of him was numb and he craved sleep almost as desperately as he craved water. But he couldn't sleep because of the hard, throbbing pain that was in his belly.

He found the strength to roll over finally and feel the pain, and after long seconds, the thought formed that the pain was from his weight having pressed upon his gun. He wrenched it out and stared at it, and it brought the rhythm of Latigo's laughter back. That sound was a primitive yell of mockery through the whole night of Medrick's spent confusion.

He rested and maybe he slept. He did not know, but he knew that thirst had finally won and that he was crazy, and that he crawled only because a man struggles right up to the end. There were no mirages on the desert at night, but he found himself wading up a great silver river, and there was the sound of music on both sides, and great paths of soft yellow light.

Somehow or other, Latigo's horse got into the river. It loomed against a flow of yellow light, standing right in front of him.

He clawed at the string of the canteen, and ripped it from the saddle.

But this, he knew, was all in delirium and there was no sense in wasting the strength to pull the cork out of a canteen which was a dream. He staggered by the horse in the crazed fever of knowing he was living a mad hallucination. He staggered up upon a rise, and stood there swaying, and the sounds

of music were still clearer than before.

Latigo's raw voice boomed out of this confusion. Boasting and laughing, "Mebbe ya thought I run away from that two bit punk! But brother, there are a lot of ways to kill a man, and what I fixed for him was the worst of all!"

Latigo's big, tough body suddenly swung into vision and was silhouetted against a flowing slash of light.

He stopped dead and stared at Medrick.

A terrible note of laughter ripped through Medrick's swollen throat. Men had gathered around there on the stoop of the Silver Hat, and they saw his grin, and it was the most merciless grin they had ever seen.

Latigo took one faltering step forward and rasped in an unbelieving whisper, "Medrick! Ya couldn't be! Ya couldn't make it afoot in the fust place, and ya wouldn't have toted yer gun!" His voice cracked with some thought. "Yore hoss wasn't done like I thought!"

Memory of that last bullet clicked in Medrick's brain. He yelled on those terrible raw notes of a man torn with thirst, "I said that bullet would be yore end, Latigo!" and he fought for the strength to lift the gun.

Latigo tried to reach for his own and could not. He was frozen by the utter hopelessness of trying to fight a man with Medrick's merciless determination. His face worked and suddenly its tough character fell to pieces. A deep sob ripped out of him, and his front broke wide with outright fright. He wheeled and bolted down the steps and threw himself into an outlaw's getaway at full

gallop. In his panic, he galloped out into the desert.

Medrick stood just as he had been, swaying, but frozen by thirst and weariness.

It was a reflex action that squeezed his finger on the trigger of his gun.

Doc Aimes stepped across the stoop and took the gun and from its heft knew that it was empty. He took the canteen, and it was heavy and these two facts made sign. He made a motion of his head at the boys to teeter Medrick over and carry him inside, and he stood on a moment looking after the sinking sound of Latigo's hoofbeats and considering the moon. The moon would be down in about two hours tonight, and no horse could find its way off trail out on that desert without light. And a man who tore out in Latigo's panic would not turn and ride back into a waiting gun. And Latigo was without water.

He looked down at Medrick's empty gun again and then with a bleak smile turned to follow the crowd inside and bring the boy around. Hack Wilson said to him, "That was the Jornada del Muerto all right!"

"In more than one way, I'm thinking," Doc agreed. "I reckon one of these days now we better take a wagon party out there and locate Latigo's bones."

He caught a wet cloth the bartender tossed, and laid it out on Medrick's fevered, raw-burned face. "Yup, like Lagito said," he commented. "There's a lot of ways to kill a man. But I don't know how in hell you'd kill a man like this one!"

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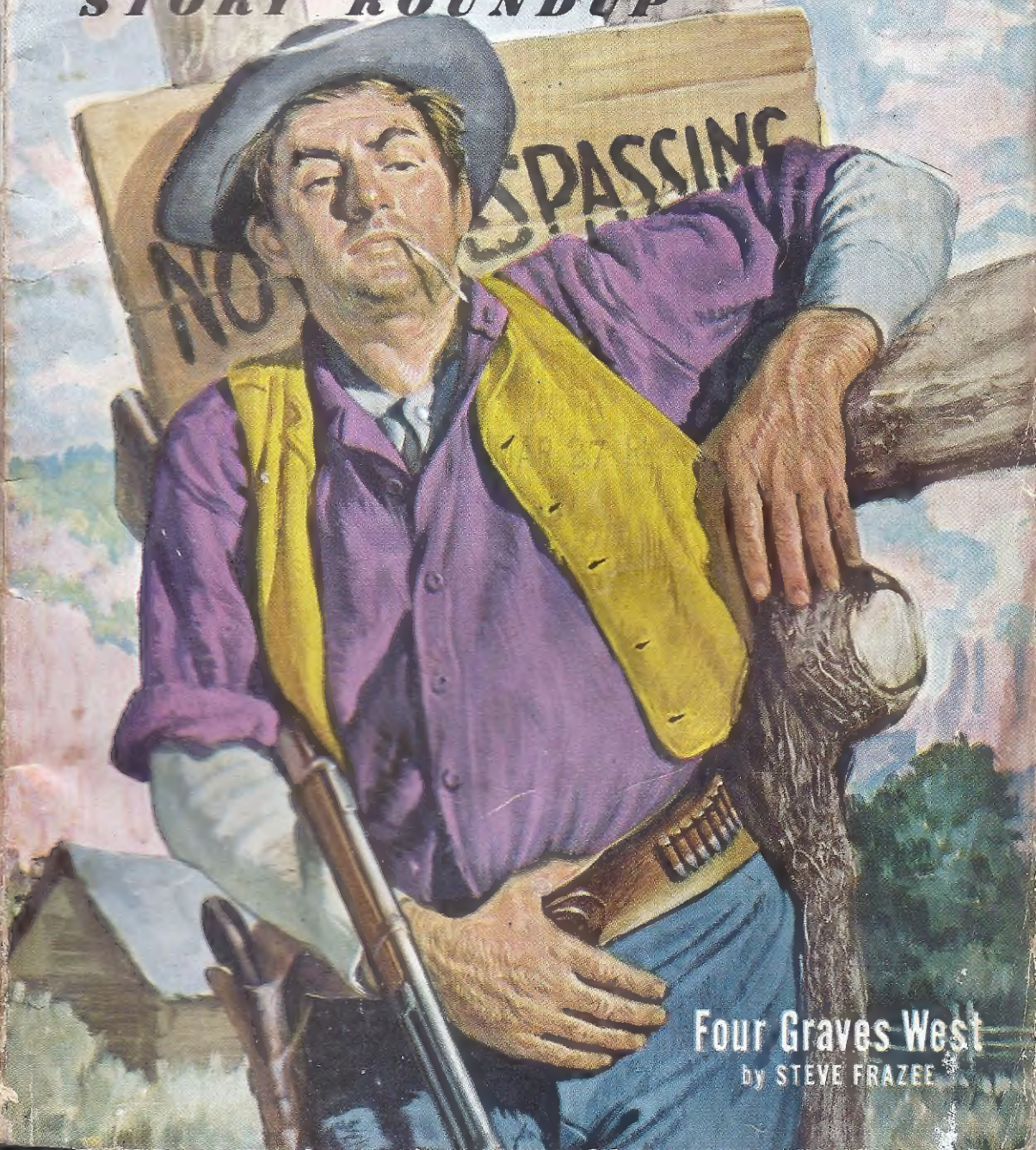


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